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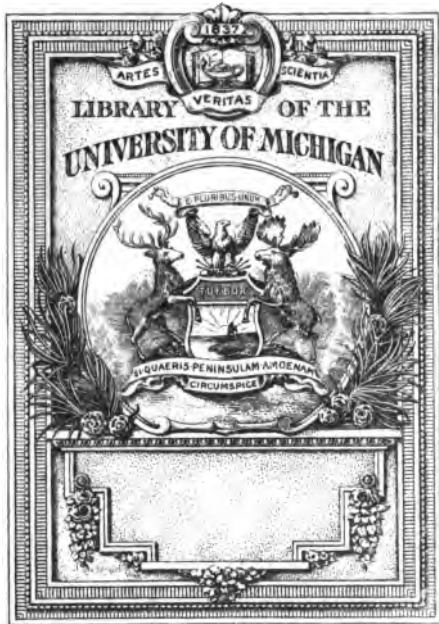
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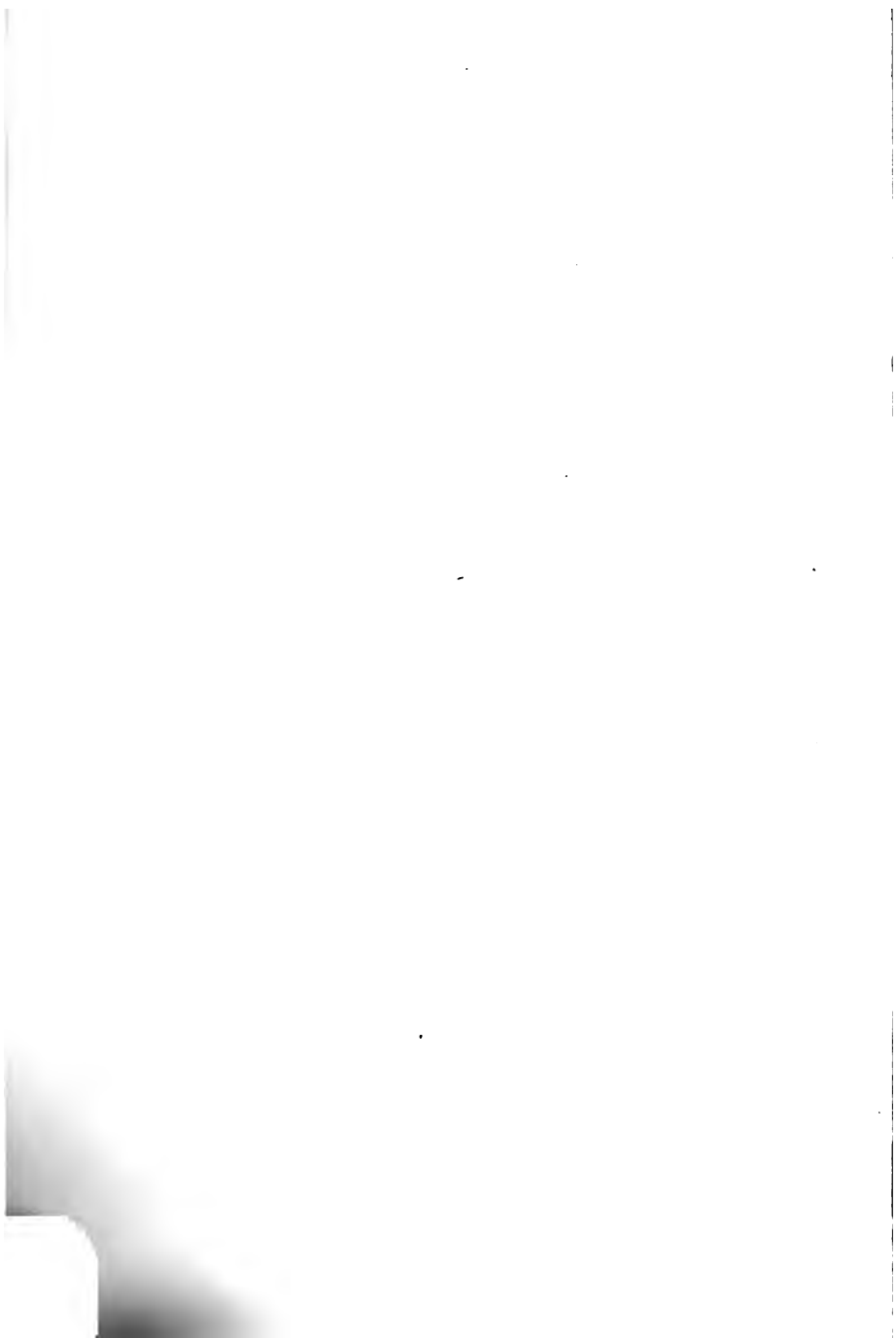
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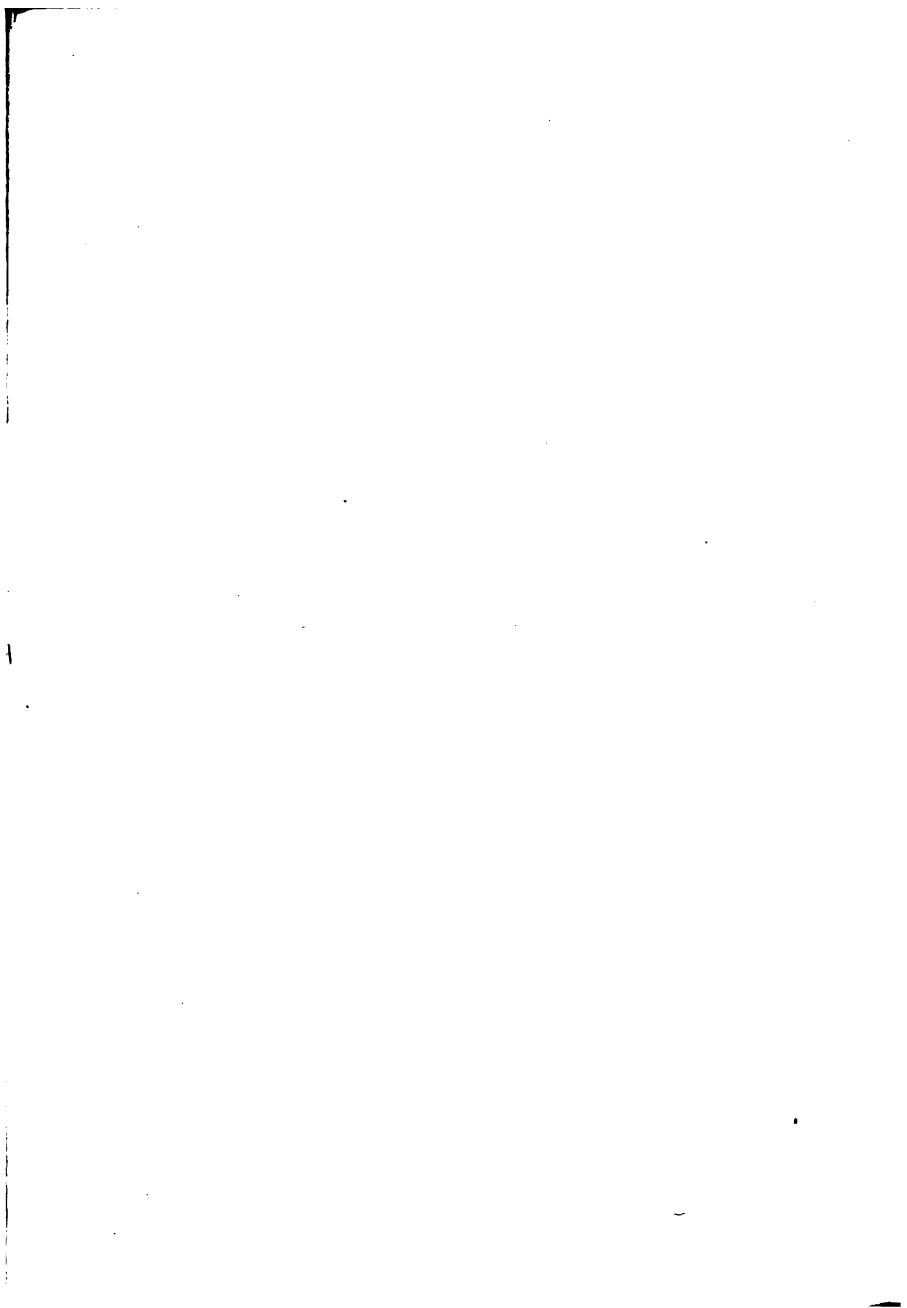
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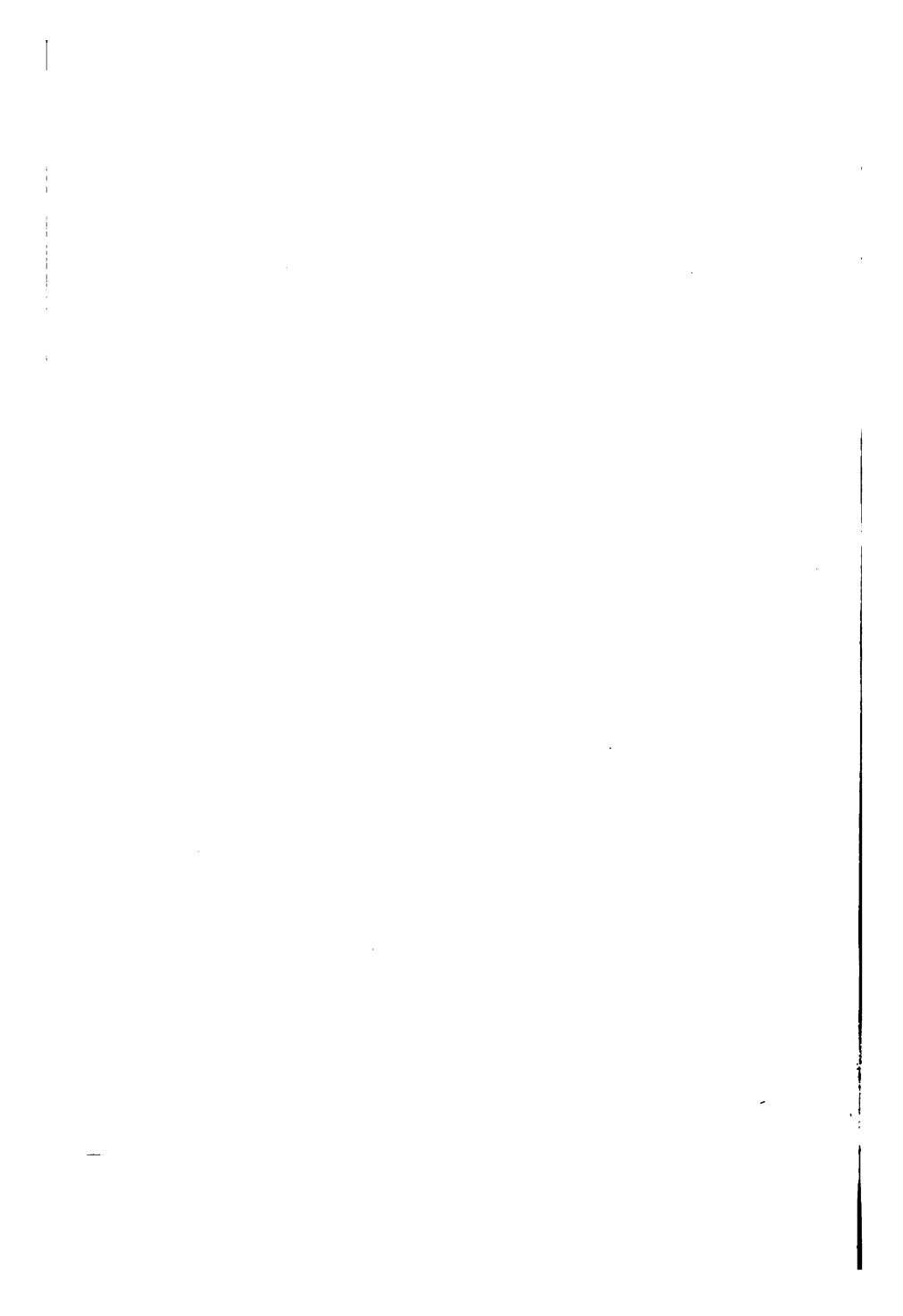


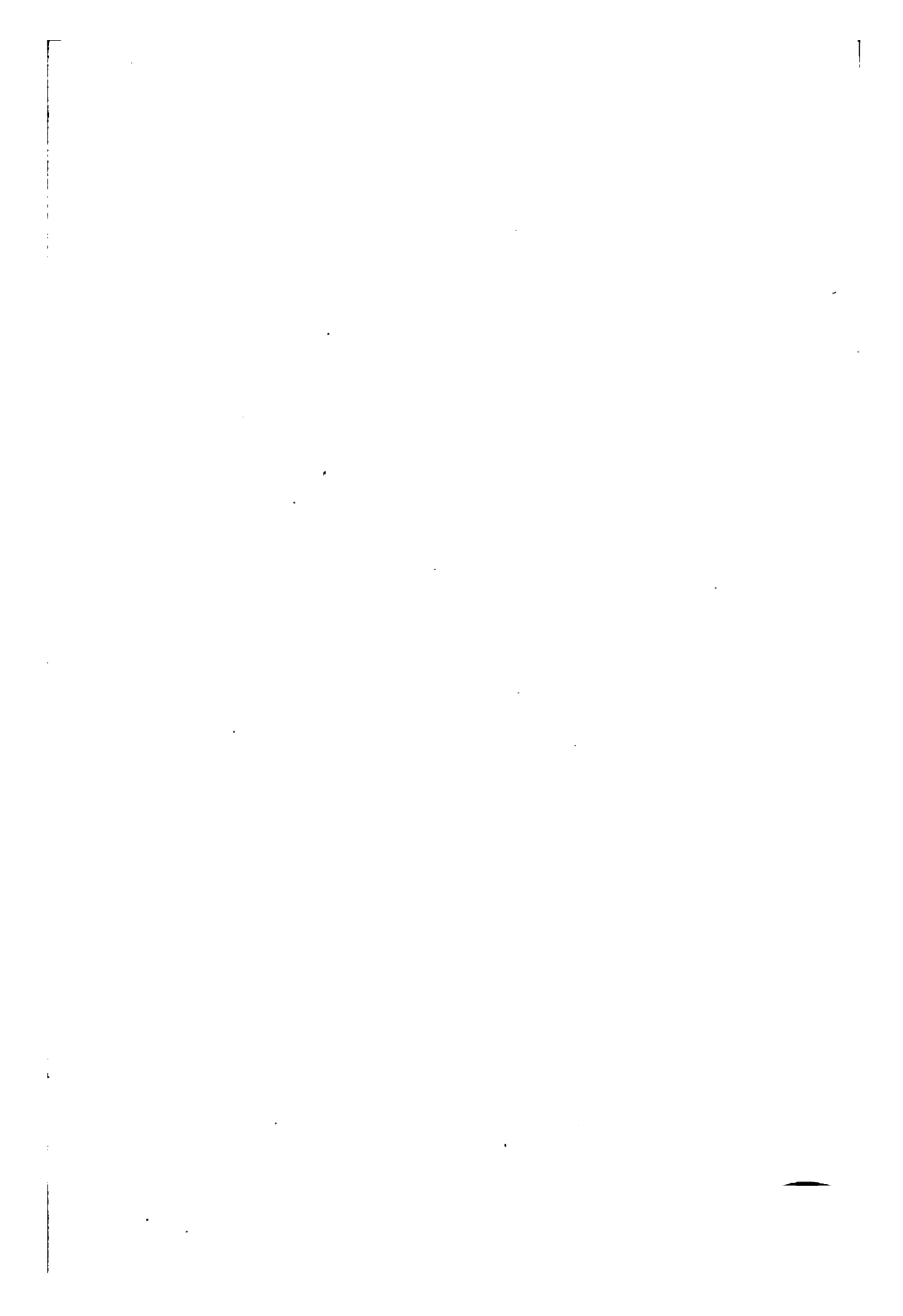
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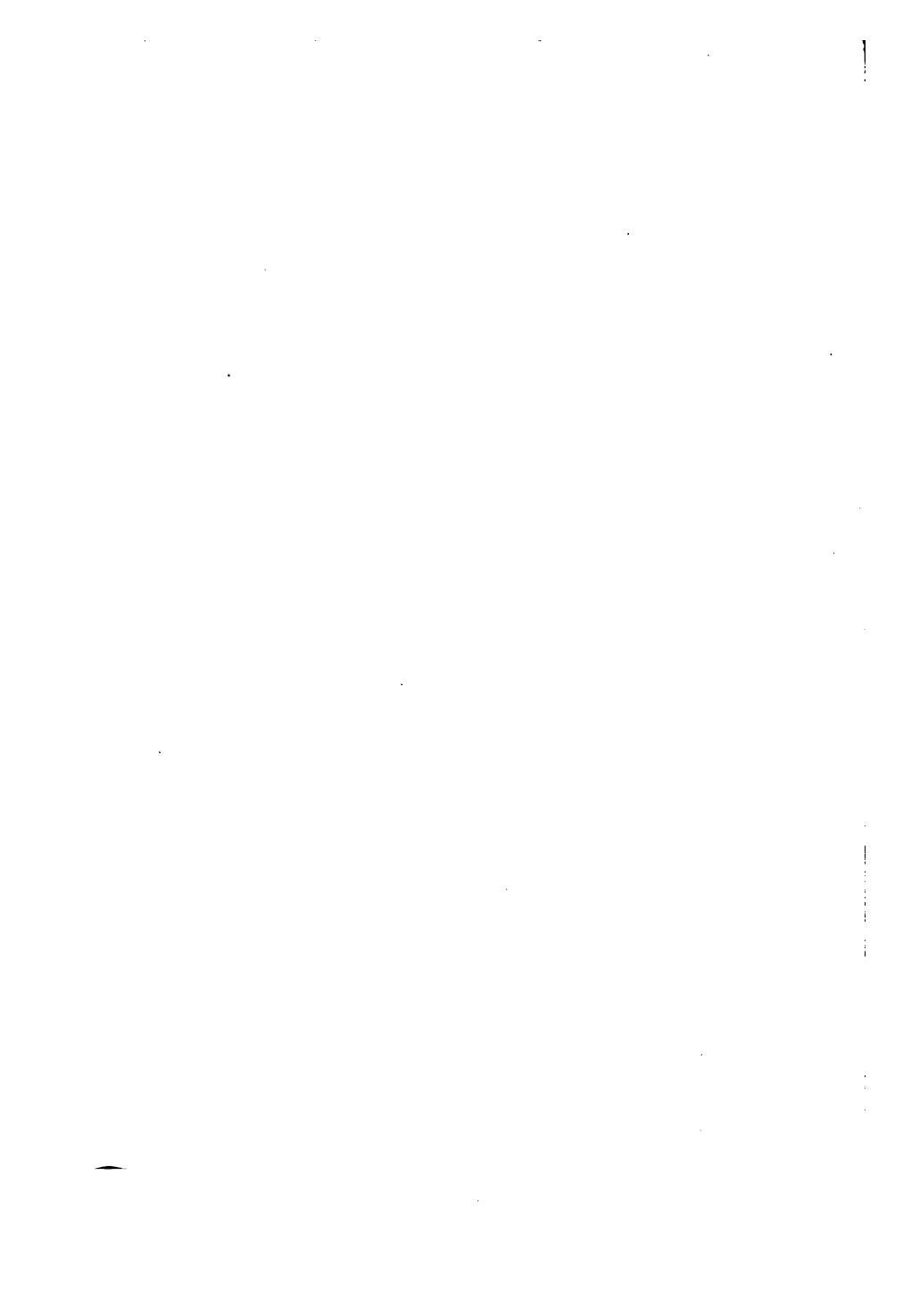
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R.

S. A. Rockett.

LADS' LOVE

BY
S. R. CROCKETT

AUTHOR OF

THE LILAC SUNBONNET; BOG-MYRTLE AND PEAT;
CLEG KELLY, ARAB OF THE CITY, ETC.

ILLUSTRATED



NEW YORK
D. APPLETON AND COMPANY
1897

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By S. R. CROCKETT.

TO
MY UNANSWERED CORRESPONDENTS.

DEAR CORRESPONDENTS,
FREE AND UNSOLICITED,

I send you at once my apology and epistle general in the form of a Dedication to this little book.

For years it has been your habit to write me, sometimes to praise, oftener to blame. You have informed me that your great-aunts cannot be expected to approve of certain passages in my works. This has indeed grieved me, but not so much as when you patriotically send me the postage stamps of your native countries—which (I tell it you once for all, and in the name of all my fellow-craftsmen who share with me your favours) do *not* frank letters of reply from our land to yours, owing to some unfeeling prejudice on the part of our British Post-office. Worst of all is it when you send me the small coinage of your realms and republics, not as tribute, but as prepayment of autographs. These the alert Postmaster-General can feel between finger and thumb as the covering letters pass through his hands. Then forthwith he sends his satraps to charge me such sums for excess and non-registration of coin as are fitted to shake the foundations of any literary finance whatsoever. This, however, be it remembered, does not apply to cheques or bank-notes.

Then, having as it were paid your footing, with a faithfulness which does you infinite credit, you proceed to inform me that I am not doing the things I ought—but, in fact, quite otherwise. Furthermore, I am leaving undone my manifest

v

17 Dec 1866 M.C.T.

duty, and refusing to fulfil my appointed destiny, humble as you correctly point out that destiny to be.

I take a letter in my hand. In it I am assured that in time I might become even a reputable writer of fiction, if only I would consent to abjure love-making, landscape, and low society, and live cleanly in a land of pure romance.

The next I open implores me not to imperil a considerable future by inserting descriptions of killings and miscellaneous bloodsheds; but, on the contrary, to confine myself to the characterisation of the domestic affection between the sexes, and the influence of vegetarian tracts on the elevation of the masses.

I am obliged, touched—grateful even; but I cannot avoid being somewhat confused.

I am reminded of my old master in the Mathematics at Edinburgh, Professor Kelland (of whose "kindly spectacle" Mr. Stevenson has written so charmingly). When Kelland sat in the seat of judgment upon our examination papers he leaned ever to the side of mercy. To his fellow-examiner he would say, touching the paper gently with his fingers, as if he would feel the beating heart that waited anxiously outside for the verdict: "We'll let the laddie through this time; he's done his best. *It's true his best is not very good!*"

So with a like kindly charity, dear distant mentors, think of me. It is not given me always to write what you would—only what I can. To write that which is in one's heart at the moment is the only rule. And the seasons change with me, and my wayward likings with them. In summer I can write with anyone of lasses and lads, and the long courtships between the gloaming and the mirk; but as soon as winter bites snell and grim, I must needs buckle on steel-cap and leathern jack and ride forth a-foraying on the English border.

Be content, therefore, with lowlier things if the knightly quest prove too high for me. After all, if the matter like you not, there is no compulsion to read—not even if, as I hope, you have gone to them that sell, and bought my merry lads in Lincoln green.

For—be it known to you—I love to write for the work's own sake, and write I must till the night cometh, whether any read me or no. If, indeed, you love that which I indite, I rejoice like a mother whose bairns are praised. But if you like my scribings not—well, pass ; at least I was entirely happy when I wrote them. I did my best with every page, slaving late and early like a man diligent at a beloved handicraft—even if, in the words of the kindly mathematician, “ my best is not very good.”

And last of all, I can always have the comfort of saying, cheerily as may be, “ We shall do better next time,” even as Braddock did when they were carrying him, dying after defeat, from the banks of the fatal Monongahela.

S. R. CROCKETT.

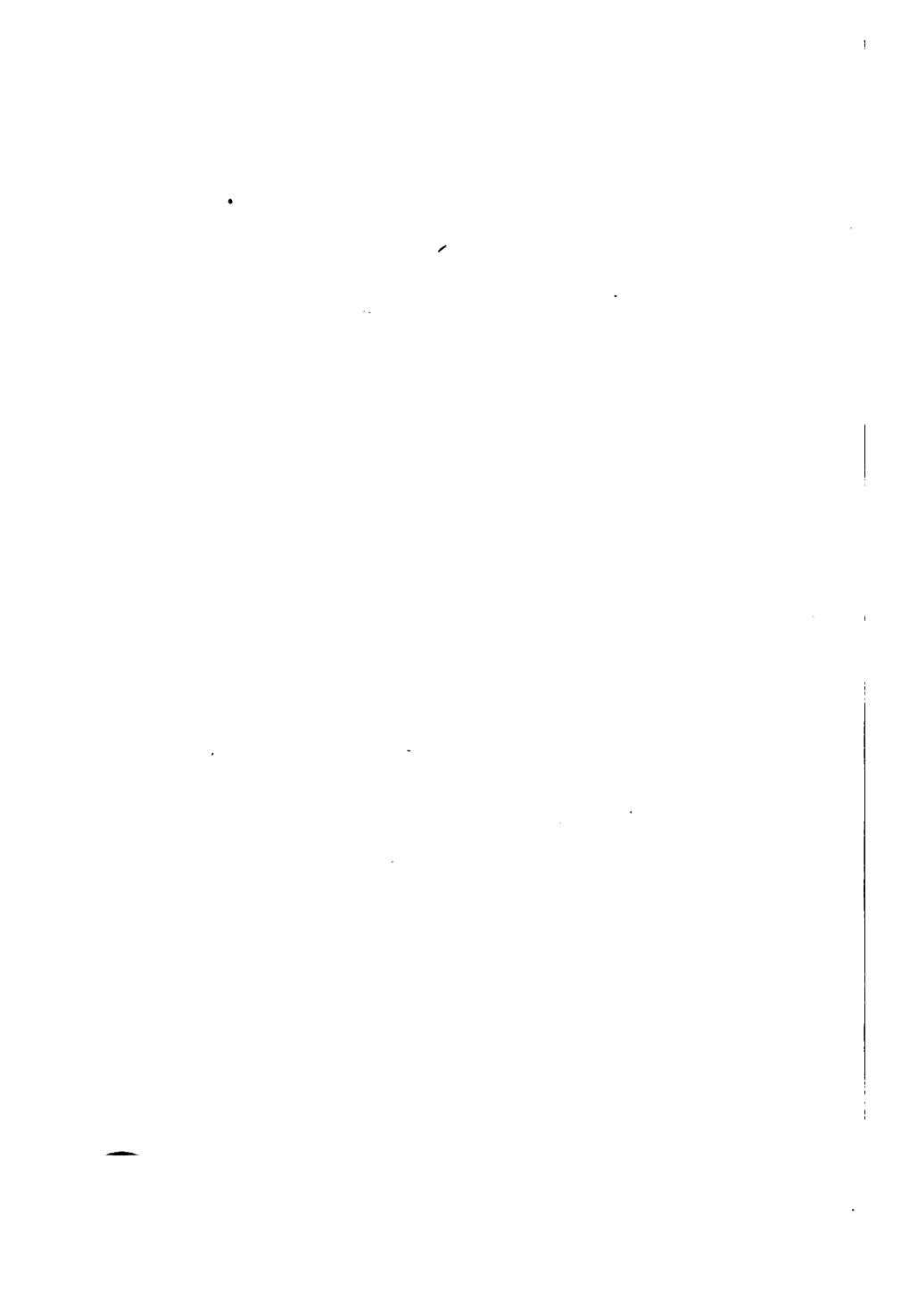
NOTE.

The somewhat peculiar and composite flavour of this little book has resulted from an attempt to epitomise the various humours, idylls, loves, and tragedies of moorland life in Scotland well-nigh half a century ago. The places are real, and the local colour exact; but the characters are wholly ideal, and cannot be identified with any actual men and women, alive or dead. I have taken the title, "Lads' Love," from the old name for the Scented Wormwood, or Southern-wood, a sprig of which wooers used to wear when they went courting, and our grandmothers to carry with them in their Bibles to church.

S. R. C.

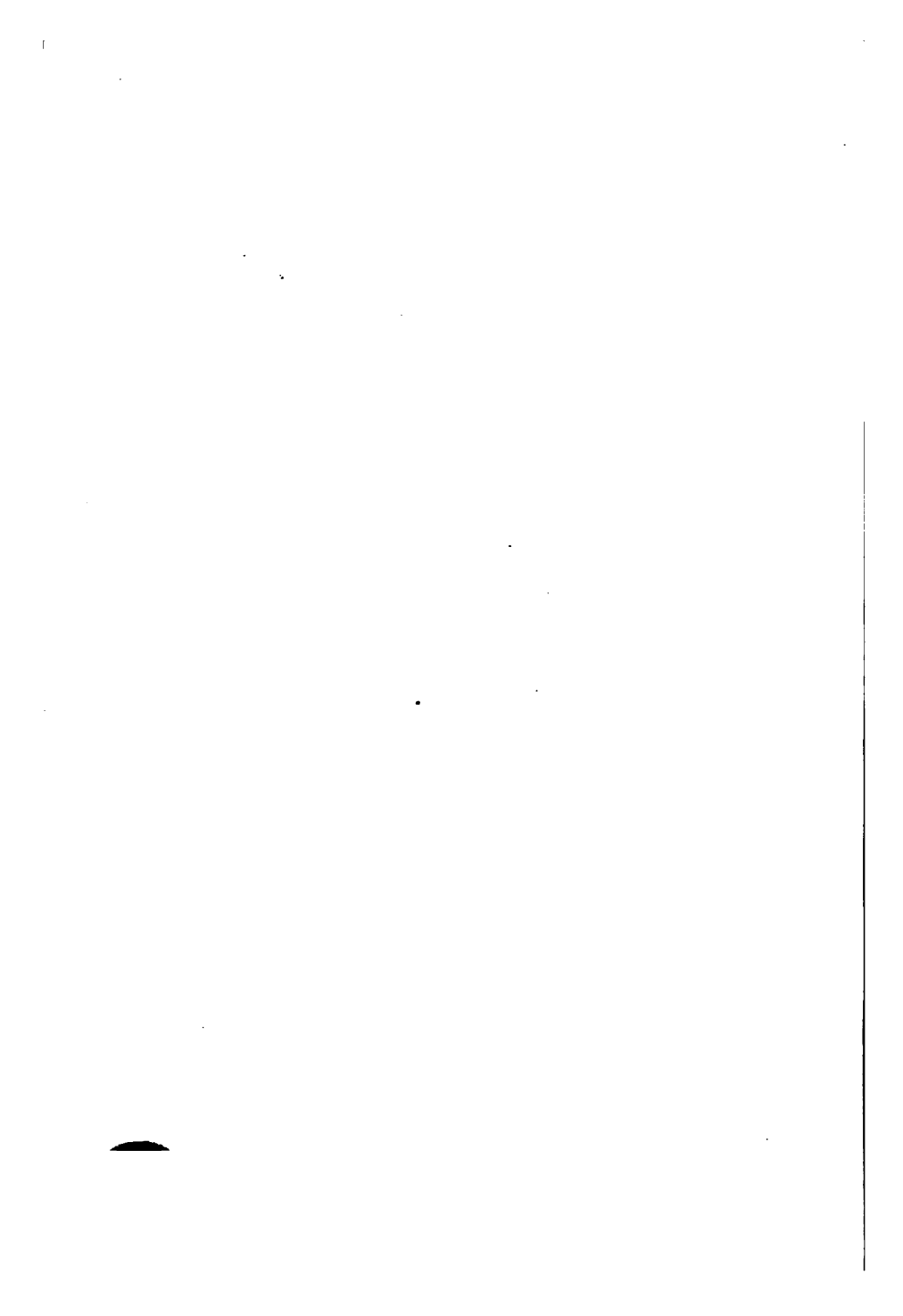
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LADS' LOVE.

CHAPTER I.

THE RETURN OF THE VICTOR.

The first time that Nathan Murdoch came home to Whinnyliggate from "the Pack," he might have easily have made himself a very popular person, for he had money in his pocket, and he was a member of a profession of widest repute in Galloway as the surest way for enterprising young men to "make siller."

The "Scotch Drapery Trade," as it was called for euphony, if not for love, was new at the time of which I am writing, and large sums were believed to be made by it. "The Pack," which is its shorter name, means in the south-west of Scotland the carrying of goods in sample and piece around to the houses of miners and factory workers in the poorer districts of the north and centre of England. It is a business which the young Scot fired with the ambition of riches does not try to carry on in his own country. What-

ever be the ethics of the trade, it is certain that it can only thrive where the people are thriftless. For, however it may have improved in these latter days, in its essence it used to consist of the victim paying ten shillings in weekly instalments for five shillings' worth of goods. But then the sufferer was always of the Southron race, and as the Scottish doctor settled in England said grimly, "It takes a lot to make up for Flodden." At all events, young Lawland Johnny still sallies forth to plunder the English foe, much as his forefathers rode southward to lift the cattle and to burn the thatch.

Of course the circulating vendor has, on his part, to take the risk of the victim not paying at all. For in districts where the name "Scotchman" is a reproach leading to assault and battery, moonlight fittings before settling day are not uncommon, and County Court summonses fall thick as the leaves in Vallombrosa.

Now when Nathan Murdoch returned to Whinnyliggate to enjoy his first holiday for five years, he had come expecting to carry all before him. Was he not twenty-five, and had he not already a gold watch? Besides which, he was not ill-looking, and though he had no particular virtues, he had not yet had time to develop his vices. He had hitherto been too much occupied

with helping his master on his pilgrimage to the sacred Mecca of a competence.

But now he was to "have a walk" or district of his own—that is, a licensed hunting-ground, with permission to track his victims at his leisure, and wring as much out of them as possible without the interference of any legitimate rival—if not by means of the old national arguments of boot- and thumb-screw, at least with the no less effective bill of sale and blue County Court summons.

Consequently Nathan had returned to his native village, elate and armed for conquest. Besides the watch and chain he possessed a hideous breastpin, in the shape of a dragon's head with eyes of ruby fire, and when a certain secret spring was touched, a spray of perfume shot out of the dragon's mouth upon whom it might concern. Nathan expected much from this elegant contrivance. Then, in addition to all this, he had thrilling tales to tell, and when he liked he could even conjure up a fine "Englishy" accent. This last, however, he was well aware, must be kept solely for the more impressionable of the lasses. Its production in the rougher parliament of the smithy or on the quiting green would indubitably produce shouts of unholy mirth. Nothing (save only a tall hat) amused Whinnyliggate so



much as the suspicion of an "Englishy" tone in the conversation of its returned children.

But chiefly, through the long weeks and days of dully gritty drudgery, Nathan had looked forward to appearing before the three fair maids of Nether Neuk in the haughty attire of the spoil-bearing conqueror.

Yet when at last he sat in the long-desired spot Nance Chrystie paid little attention to him. She sat knitting and listening indeed to Nathan's tales of that far Paradise of English milk and English honey into which the "packman" had so lately entered to possess it.*

In sharp contrast to the indifference of his daughters, Peter Chrystie, Nance's father, bent his keen grey eyes on the youth, who sat twirling upwards the ends of his moustache and smiling at his own good pleasure in the tale he told.

"Aye, and ye tell me that siller can be had for the liftin' where ye come from?" said Peter insinuatingly.

"It can be had for the pickin' up, as plenty

* I do not wish to be thought desirous of casting reproach upon a lawful trade with quite honourable possibilities, through which many men have passed with unshaken credit and approved honesty. Nathan Murdoch was a—well, what will appear in the course of my tale, but then he would have been equally one if he had been a doctor, or even an author.

as slate stanes!" cried Nathan, slapping his knee for emphasis.

"And how do ye get the silly English folk to buy your goods when they can get them cheaper elsewhere?"

Nathan smiled yet more complacently, and twisted his moustache a little higher.

"Oh, there's ways——" said he, nodding mysteriously.

"Draw up your chair!" cried Peter Chrystie, nodding commendation. All that appertained to money-getting was of the sweet essential elixir of life to him.

"Weel, ye see, Nether Neuk," Nathan began, warming himself in the red glow of well-merited appreciation, and the intoxication of talking on equal terms with the father of the famous maids of Nether Neuk, "to begin with, it behoves to let them easy into your debt. Ye gang amang the wives when the men are frae hame. Ye hae your samples handy, a thocht better than the webs, maybe. Ye flatter and flairdie them a while—a' the women folk like a guid-gaun tongue: 'This would become you well, mistress! This would set your bonnie, well-fared face'—a bonnet, a dress, a watch and chain, maybe—'any one of them would make ye the envy of your neighbours. The money? Oh, never trou-

ble yourself about the money. What is that amongst friends? It will be all right—a paper to sign, a trifle every week or so, and you can have the article now instead of waiting months, and perhaps never getting it at all.

“That’s the start,” continued Nathan, nursing his knees affectionately, with a pause for the inward contemplation of his own shrewdness. “Then when he hae the silly geds safe on the hook, ye come round every week to get the siller. And in a week or twa the puir bit wife is no ready. She has had extra to pay out that week. Her man brought her five shillings less hame on pay-nicht. Then ye get your second chance. Ye hae some damaged fabrics that ye bocht dirt cheap, and that ye want desperately to get rid of. Will she hae ten yairds o’ that—fifteen o’ this?”

“No, she does not want it! Does not need the like!

“Well, then, ye are terrible sorry, but ye will hae to press for the instalment o’ the goods bought last. Howsomever, ye dinna want to be hard—ye will call round again when the guidman comes hame frae his wark!

“And at that, up rises your wife in deadly fear, for ye may be sure she has said nothing to her man about her purchases.

“When ye come oot o’ that hoose ye hae sold ten yairds o’ damaged claiith at a profit o’ three or fower hunder per cent! What think ye o’ that?”

Nathan looked about him for admiration. Peter Chrystie’s face expressed solid tons of it. But there was an ill-omened glitter in the down-cast eyes of Nance, that demure and imperious beauty, as she kept them steadily fixed on her work.

Encouraged by the wondering silence, the narrator again took up his heroic tale:

“Then after a time or two like that, as ye can see, ye hae them in your grip, and can squeeze them at your leisure!”

“And do the puir folk always pay up some time?” asked Peter, who wanted to realise the risks as well as be informed of the rewards.

“Ah,” cried Nathan, “they try a’ mainer o’ tricks to get clear, but we are far ower gleg and wary for the wretches. For instance, some day you’ll be on your ‘round,’ and ye come to a door where the wife is deep in debt, firm nippit by the nose. Ye chap and chap and better chap, but there is nae answer. Ye push the door open. There is maybe a bit callant o’ eight or nine, sitting playing wi’ a tawtie on the floor.

“ ‘Where’s your mither, laddie?’ ye say briskly.

“ ‘She’s out, mon!’

“ ‘*Then did your mother leave the shillin’?*’ says you, as if butter would never melt in your mouth!

“ Then maybe you have the same happen to you in half-a-dozen of the houses, and it is no just pleasant to go out of the village with a string of ill-set tatterdemalion weans at your tail, all marching with the goose-step, and shouting your own question as loud as they can yell:

“ ‘*Did your mother leave the shillin’?*’

“ ‘*Did your mother leave the shillin’?*’ ”

For the first time Nance Chrystie looked up and smiled; but the glint in her eye was as dangerous as ever, like the gray of steel before it strikes the flint.

But all unwarned, Nathan went on his rejoiciful way.

“ Another good way to make siller,” he explained, feeling that he held the floor, “ is never to have journeymen helpers, but aye ’prentices. Ye see it is a custom in the trade that ye take an apprentice for three or four year, and then at the end o’ that time ye are obliged by the indentures to gie him his ‘round’ or ‘walk’ to himself. But there’s a usefu’ clause about finishin’ his ’pren-

ticeship. Then the lad, thinkin' that he'll get the district for his ain in a year or twa, tries his best to draw guid business, and is aye pushin' and steady, and what is better, he——”

“ In fact, he sees that your mother leaves the shillin'!” put in Nance Chrystie demurely, and without a twinkle.

“ Yes, ah—not exactly, Miss Nance,” said Nathan Murdoch, smiling, but with a vague sense that all was not right; “ then when the 'prentice's time is nearly up, ye can aye get an excuse to quarrel wi' him, pick some fau't wi' his accounts, and get rid o' him. Then ye get anither 'prentice, and start him on the 'round' for anither three year. In that way, by judgment and care, I hae kenned o' braw fortunes being made in a very short time.”

“ You lads will be muckle respected and looked up to in your districts?” said Nance, looking up at him with a sweetness hardly less than paralysing.

“ Aye,” laughed Nathan, well pleased; “ ye should just see the wives rinnin' to dust a chair for us when we gang in!”

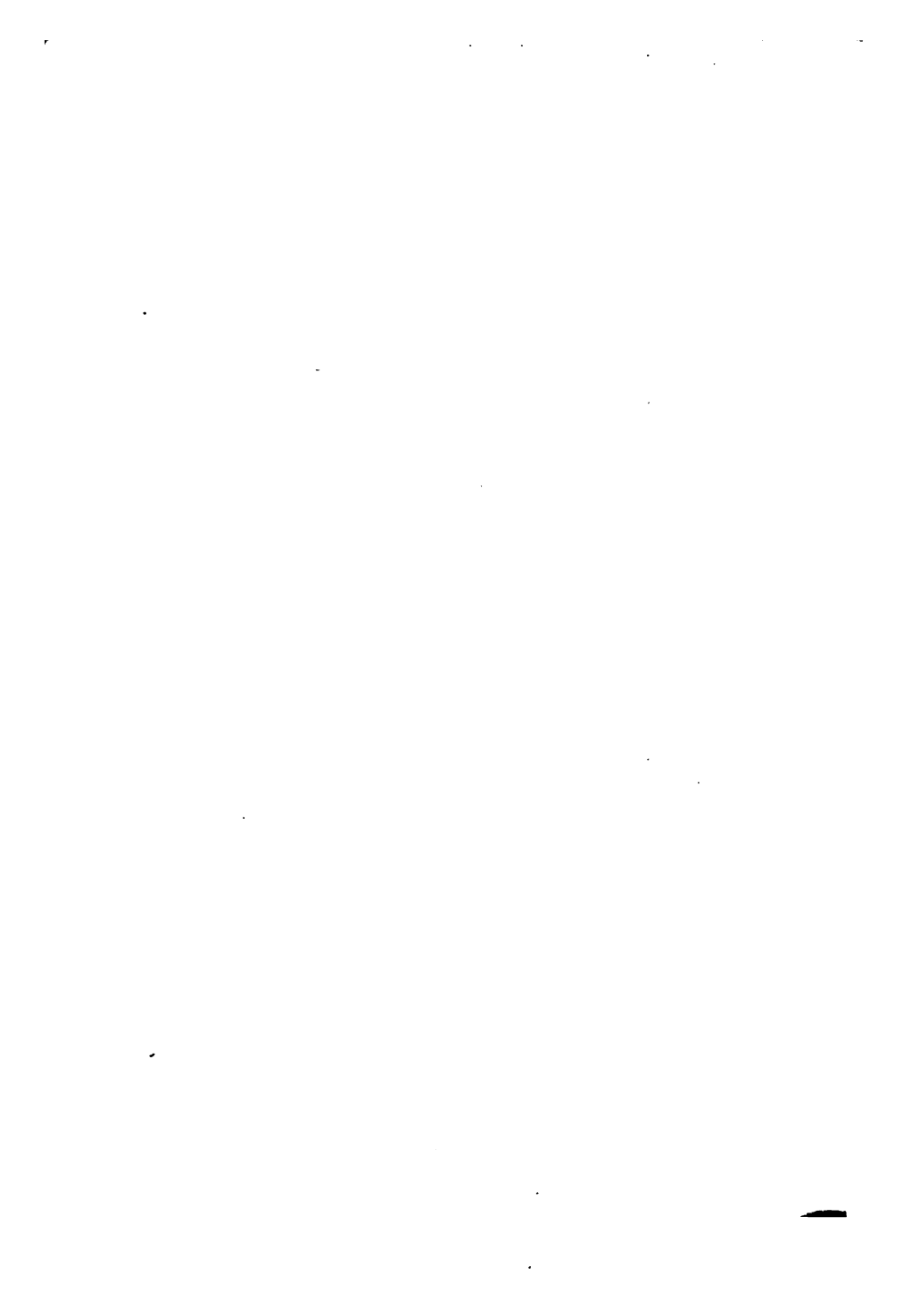
Nance rose slowly till her slim, tall figure confronted him. Scorn sat finely on the chiselled curve of her nostrils, disgust was oratory in the curl of her full red lips.

“ If I were the men that the wives belonged to,” she said, “ I would dust an unplanned paling rail, and set you and your ‘ pack ’ on it; then I would ride you rough-shod to the dirtiest dub of the nearest horse-pond, and there I would leave you and your pack, your swatches, and your County Court notices, where they ought to be—up to the neck in glaur! ” *

And with that she flashed like an angry princess out of the room.

“ Nance! ” cried her father indignantly; but he was too late to stop her. “ Never heed her,” he added consolingly to the insulted narrator, “ she is but a daft, regardless lassie, and kens nae better! ”

* Mud of a sticky and unpleasant consistency.





The wild thing on the moor.

CHAPTER II.

THE WILD THING ON THE MOOR.

But Nathan Murdoch was not to be so readily soothed. A father's approval is small consolation for the daughter's scorn, when you go to call upon both in a new suit, a watch-chain, and a scent-sprinkler, as it were, triply armed for conquest.

So after a little Nathan said good-night and went out to wander disconsolately across the moor. He sat down on a "tummock" of brown bents, and thought the visit over from first to last. He was downcast and disconsolate. He put his head between his hands. He sat there a long time motionless, thinking intently of Nance Christie's strange behaviour.

He did not observe a gipsy face, with great dark eyes and hair falling in witch tangles about it, which looked at him steadily and curiously out of a whin-bush. After a while the shoulders appeared, followed noiselessly in their turn by the

body, and then by a brief sufficient vision of the ragged skirts and nut-brown ankles of a long-limbed girl of about fifteen. Still all unconscious, Nathan Murdoch sat still and kept his head between his hands. His packman's pride was in the dust. He hated all mankind, and girl-kind worst of all. He would go back to Bolton-le-Moors, and bury himself in the excitement of running a keen-edged business on his own account.

Presently the pretty gipsy, hidden again among the gorse, puckered her lips and whistled a mellow stave like a blackbird tuning up for his evening concert. Then, quick in retreat as the bird himself, the great dark eyes and the rebellious hair-tangles were ducked down behind the whin-bush.

Nathan looked all about. The moor lay bare as the palm of his hand—the silly birds crying, the stupid sheep browsing head down, and from the heather-bushes the yellow-breeched bumblebees setting grumbly homewards. Nathan sighed.

Again there came the mellow whistle behind him, and this time he was just in time to see the dark head flash behind the yellow and green pincushion of the gorse.

“Come out of that!” he cried indignantly.

A lithe, girlish form darted back a dozen steps, and then halted uncertainly, as a startled deer might do, curiosity and suspicion at war behind her eyes.

“Come here, I tell you!” cried Nathan Murdoch angrily. “What do you want?”

The girl did not move. He went a step or two towards her. She stood ready to spring away, her whole light body poised for flight. But somehow Nathan held her with his eyes. She stood quivering, fascinated.

“Jove!” he said at last; “but you’ll be a beauty in a year or two, my lassie!”

She stood still, looking at him, wild and shy as a fawn come down to drink by the water-side.

“What’s your name?” he said.

“The Hoolet!” said the girl, speaking suddenly, almost angrily—as if her words were impelled from behind her white teeth like an unwelcome intruder kicked off a doorstep.

But when Nathan began to approach too near, the girl leaped back quickly, passing from one grassy hummock to another, lightly as a bird hops upon a bending spray.

Then Nathan sat down and put his brow again on his hand. The “Hoolet” regarded him suspiciously for a minute, holding her head first on

one side and then on the other. Then in her turn the girl began to approach cautiously.

"Are ye hungry?" she asked anxiously, but ready all the same to flee at the stirring of a finger.

He shook his head.

"Hae!" she said briefly.

And in a flash, a double handful of purple-bloomed blaeberrys were lying beside him and Hoolet was back again in her old place.

"I am not hungry," he said, without glancing up.

The Hoolet looked anxious.

"Did onybody thresh ye?" she enquired.

"No!" said Nathan Murdoch, thinking sadly of Nance Chrystie's bitter tongue and his own wounded pride.

The Hoolet tried again.

"Hae ye a thorn in your foot?"

Once more Nathan shook his head and this time he rose. The Hoolet was in despair. A grief that could not be cured by ripe, well-plumped blaeberrys, which proceeded neither from a beating with a stick nor yet from a thorn in the foot, was too awful and mysterious for her understanding.

Nathan made as if he would go towards the village. The Hoolet convoyed him, keeping par-

allel to his course, but ten yards off. An idea struck her.

“Are folk no kind to ye?” she asked.

Nathan thought bitterly once more upon cruel Nance.

“No,” he answered; “the folk are not kind to me here. I am going far, far away!”

“But ye will come back?” cried the girl anxiously, clasping her hands. Something in her face took Nathan’s roving eye and held it.

He stopped and looked at her from head to foot, as she stood before him with her eyes aflame, the elf-locks about her brow waving a little in the light summer wind, her bosom heaving with excitement, her cheeks dusky red, her arms bare and brown, the scanty dress scarcely concealing her slim lithe figure, and beneath its utmost ragged fringe a vision of feet and ankles brown and bare midway to the knee.

“Did anybody ever tell ye that ye were bonny, lassie?” he said after a long pause.

“Na,” she answered, breathing quickly; “naebody ever telled me that!”

“Well,” said Nathan Murdoch, “what do you say when I tell it you? For by my faith, ye are a bonny lass, and will be far bonnier before lang.”

The tide of dusky red flushed in level flood up

her neck to her face, as if it had suddenly come pouring from where her scant gown was dis-trained a little open in front, her youth bourge-oning too quickly beneath it. It glowed like a damask rose on either dusky cheek, and faded away about her ears and on the low broad brow over which the dark curls clustered.

“What do you say when I tell you that some day ye will be the bonniest lass in a’ Whinny-liggate parish?”

“I dinna believe ye,” she said softly, “but oh, I like to hear ye say it!”

Next Sunday when the kirk came out, Na-than, who by that time had almost forgotten his meeting on the moor with the Hoolet, tried once more to attract to himself the attention of the present imperious belle of the parish.

But Nance Chrystie looked across at him only once, and then in full hearing of the kirkyard parliament she said, “Did your mother leave the shilling?”

By which Nathan knew that the tale was out, and indeed every child in the village knew it long before this, for in those days Nance Chrystie’s least words were carried by the birds of the air.

The very next day Nathan chanced to go

down the single winding street of the village. It was the "scaling time" of the school. The boys joyously noted his coming. There was a hurried conclave among them, and as soon as he had passed, a band of the youth and impudence of Whinnyliggate came stilting after him, with a gait intended to represent the military goose-step. And as they marched they sang, ceasing neither when their mothers shook their fists at them from the doorsteps, nor even when the schoolmaster looked out of the school-house door with the dread official tawse in his hand.

"Did your mother leave the shillin'?"

"Did your mother leave the shillin'?"

Tam Gillespie marched in front, drumming the monotonous refrain upon his own proudly inflated stomach. Every window-blind in the village street was set with faces, red like peonies with carefully suppressed laughter.

Nathan tried to walk calmly along without taking the least notice. It was his wisest course, but the imps were too pertinacious. At last, much against his will, he had to take refuge in the smiddy, bitterly muttering to himself. "I'll leave the place this very day, and never come back to it till I have made sae muckle siller that every one o' them will be ready to lick the dust

before me—that pridefu' madam Nance Chrystie and all!”

And to do Nathan Murdoch justice, he kept his word. But he should not have included Nance Chrystie. He did not know that young woman.

The smith and his apprentice were well aware of his coming, while the synod of three ploughmen and a herd, who were waiting to have horses shod and scythes set, had watched the procession moving down the street with mirthful appreciation. But when at last Nathan entered the smiddy for refuge, you could never have guessed from their six faces that any one of them knew aught of the matter. A sedate and even philosophic gloom sat on every countenance, and each man seemed to be intent solely on counting the *clinkum-clanks* of the smith and his apprentice as their hammers rose and fell upon the anvil.

Outside, the Packman's marching tail of scurriel loons formed up about the smiddy, and sang their refrain in chorus, marking the time—

“*Did your mother leave the skill-un' ?*”

“It's brave and fine weather,” said the smith, whose right it was to lead conversation in his own smiddy; “you'll be thinkin' o' takkin' a langer holiday amang us, nae doot?”

“*Did your moth—*”

“I was thinking of returning to my duties to-morrow!”

“—*er leave the skillun’?*”

“Ye’ll be missed in this village,” said the smith, gravely blowing up the fire; “we have few visitors of note here.”

A week—nay, two days, ago Nathan might have been taken in by the persiflage, but the running comment outside was too caustic.

“*Did your moth—did your moth—*” (*Chorus fortissimo*) “*Did your mother leave the skillun’—leave the skillun’—leave the skillun’? Did your mother leave the skillun’?*”

Suddenly there came a diversion without—yells, shouts of anger, screams of pain, the sounds of blows stricken “for keeps,” the patter of hasty flight.

Everyone in the smiddy ran to doors and windows—Nathan last of all.

This is what they saw—a tall lass with a weighty hazel “rung” in her hand, flailing it fiercely among the rout of ribald laddies, her arm rising and falling, “for a’ the world like a man threshin’ corn in a barn,” as the smith put it.

It was the Hoolet.

When Nathan Murdoch discerned what champion was fighting his battles, he smiled a little

to himself, and twisted his thin moustache more thoughtfully.

“One day I shall surely come back,” he said, “and then they shall lick the dust before me.”

And without once turning his head to look after the Hoolet, or saying a word of good-bye to the smiddy, he turned and walked up the street to pack his bag.

When in the afternoon Nathan Murdoch left Whinnyliggate to meet the coach, the Hoolet watched him out of sight—as usual, from behind a whin-bush. And her eyes were great and misty and wet.

“It’s no true what he telled me,” she said over and over to herself; “but it’s a bonny, bonny lee! I liked fine to hear him say it.”

CHAPTER III.

RAB AN'ERSON, LAZY TAED.

“Saw ye ocht o’ Rab An’erson, lazy taed? *
Saw ye ocht o’ Rab An’erson, lazy taed?”

It was the keen, thin, wire-drawn voice of Peter Chrystie, farmer of Nether Neuk, rising and falling over the scanty ploughed fields and pasture lands which made a kind of emerald eye, under the dark purple eyebrow of the heather. It was a voice with a rasping screech in it, for all the world like a wagon-wheel crying out for its rations of grease. Peter was known throughout all the parish of Whinnyliggate as a “character.” And in our part of the country this ambiguous appellation, when pronounced with a little downward nod of the head, generally means that the person so distinguished will, to say the least of it, bear watching—especially in affairs pecuniary as between man and man.

* Toad.

There was no doubt whatever that Peter was a keen hand at a bargain. His whole features changed as soon as he scented his prey, and it was with an unction little less than religious that he would say to a crony upon market-days: "Hech, sirs, this is dry wark! Come awa' into the Blue Bell and thresh it oot ower a gill o' Betty Logan's best!"

And in the kirkyard, when the irregular but all-powerful weekly parish council was assembled to settle the affairs of the universe, there was no kirk attendant more remarkable for the consistent worldliness of his conversation, nor yet more impressive in the solemn sense of responsibility conveyed to all beholders by his well-creased "blacks," than Peter Chrystie of Nether Neuk. For Peter was an elder. That is to say, he "offeeshiated" every Sabbath with "the ladle" at the close of the sermon. All his duties as an ecclesiastical dignitary were summed up and closed in that. The "ladle" was a square box fixed at the end of a long pole, which was protruded beneath the nose of every worshipper in Whinnyliggate Kirk, for the laudable purpose of inducing him to "contribute to the funds for the behoof of the poor of the pairish."

When Peter thus "offeeshiated," he used to take a special delight in rattling the bottom of

the contribution box as he pushed it along the book-boards of all "puir gi'ers." Nevertheless, he had, even in these solemn circumstances, and when thus engaged in stimulating Christian benevolence throughout the parish, a singularly clear and cool eye to the main chance.

So intent was the farmer upon his "troking and trafficking," that he has been known to lean across from the "aisle," as he passed a fellow-elder similarly occupied in collecting the coppers from the "arrie," or centre of the kirk, and, with a face as grave and solemn as a Cameronian communion, to say, "I'll tak' twa-an'-twunty for thae yowes, an' de'il a fardin' less. Sae I'm tellin' ye, Barnboard!"

Barnboard is my authority for this. He told my father, Saunders McQuhirr, of Drumquhat, and my father told me. So the matter is neither "he said," nor "she said," but just plain, uncarried fact.

Barnboard's own version of his reply is that he said, "I wonder at ye, Nether Neuk, profanin' the hoose o' God and the Sabbath day wi' your sheep-dealin' and nifferin'!"

A less highly moral, but intrinsically much more probable version is that Barnboard replied, "*Twunty-wan* I'll bid ye, Neuk—an' a hanged sicht ower dear!" For all that, certain it is that

Barnboard bought the ewes, and that the price was as certainly exactly two-and-twenty shillings sterling. The purchaser justly thought that the price was "over the score," and he told the story of the bargain across the kirk-aisle to be upsides with Peter Chrystie.

When Peter heard of it, he remarked that Barnboard's story was an unqualified falsehood. This was not the exact text of his remarks, but, as one might say, the gist only. A verbatim report has (perhaps happily) failed to come down to us:

It was this Peter Chrystie of Nether Neuk, elder of the kirk on Sundays and practical materialist during the week, who was now seeking his "orra man" * through all the intricacies of the farm-steading and outbuildings of Nether Neuk. Rab An'erson, dyker, herd, poacher, had been warned out of the exceedingly limited premises which he still occupied by the side of the Lang Wood of Larbrax as many as twenty times. He had been dismissed with ignominy from the service of Peter Chrystie every lawful day ever since he entered it—twelve years ago. And generally twice every Sunday.

Nevertheless, Rab An'erson still remained

* *Orra man*, i. e. general emergency man, who is required to turn his hand to anything.

both in the dirty cot-house by the Lang Wood, and eke in the service of Peter Chrystie. Indeed, one reason why he had not been turned out of his dwelling, was because there was good reason for believing that no other beings of the human species would have consented to occupy it after him.

A ploughman, who had been engaged by Peter at the Rood Fair of Cairn Edward, arrived one day to examine the house before bringing his family. He looked just once in at Rab An'erson's dominions, sniffed their mingled attar of chickens and children, and then made one remark. It was a remark with some pith in it. Peter Chrystie was standing by his elbow and had the benefit of it.

"Ye ask me to bring my wife an' bairns into the like o' that," said the Crossmichael ploughman. "Man, I didna mairry a sool!"*

And throwing Peter's shilling of "arles" in his astonished face, the undaunted ploughman took a bee-line for the ferry by the bonny kirk-knowe of Balmaghie, back to a land where a working-man was at least decently housed, if somewhat insufficiently paid. Peter was so astonished that he had not even the presence of

* *Sool*, *i. e.* a sow—the mother of piglings.

mind to threaten the man from Crossmichael with the Sheriff-Court for breaking his bargain—an omission which he afterwards bitterly regretted.

So, in the absence of any other tenant, Rab An'erson stayed on in the cot-house. His two ragged children, a boy and a girl, came daily to the back door of the farmhouse of Nether Neuk, to receive the platefuls of stray provisions which Peter's unobtrusive second wife, Clemmy Kilpatrick, hid for them, slipping the victual under her apron when her lord and master was safely out of the way.

Peter had married Clemmy when she was a strong, rosy-checked byre-lass, and at a time when his three handsome daughters were but tow-headed girls, skelping bare-legged about the fields of Nether Neuk. But in spite of her matronly dignities a byre-lass Clemmy remained; and though she could lawfully claim bed and board, in practice she never asked more than the latter. Once a month or so Clemmy would make the pretence of taking breakfast with Peter and his daughters, Nance, Grace, and the Hempie. But it was only as one might say, a formal Claim of Right, and before the meal was half over Clemmy would vanish again to the kitchen parts with a sigh of immense relief. And there for the rest of the month she would be quite happy to take

her meals, along with the hired lasses and lads in that wide equitable republic to which she had been born, and whose free speech was so much cheerier than the frosty elegancies of the "ben room." Nance and the Hempie often wished that they could have accompanied her out of the chill proprieties of the "parlour" in which Peter read the week-before-last's newspaper, into this roystering commonwealth of which the boundaries were the ingle-neuk and the kitchen settle, and where all the latest news of the parish was announced even before it happened, while mocking laughter and gay comment rang loud and long.

"Saw ye ocht o' Rab An'erson, lazy taed?"

It was the voice of Peter Chrystie which came with an angry snarl through the doorway where Clemmy was serving the Hoolet and the De'il with the best broken meats that her cupboard afforded. These two unrepentant prodigals, the Hoolet and the De'il, hastened to thrust their "pieces" under their ragged coats as soon as ever they heard the first note of Peter's voice. For though the "Hoolet" was a girl of fifteen, and well grown for her age, she was dressed exactly after the fashion of her brother, save that a little below her knees there appeared an apology for a skirt, so short and unobtrusive that to the

cursory glance it suggested little difference of sex. But then no one, except perhaps the visiting policeman on his monthly rounds, ever cast a look more than cursory at either the Hoolet or the De'il.

Presently Peter Chrystie emerged from the back door of Nether Neuk with his head thrust forward like a hawk on the pounce. He saw the pair stand guilty and manifestly conscience-stricken at the side of his gable wall—for Clemmy had basely deserted at the first sound of her husband's approach. The De'il was scratching his left leg with his right toe. The Hoolet, on the other hand, used the left toe to scratch her right leg. Thus by a simple variation both manners and modesty were suggested.

"Get awa' frae aboot my doors, ye limmers!" cried Peter, so shrilly that his words sounded more like a weasel squeaking out of a dry dyke than the voice of an elder of the kirk. "What mean ye by slinking up dyke-backs?—To see what ye can steal, I'se warrant! Let me see ye here again, ye vagabonds, an' I'll lay information wi' the polissman the verra next time that he comes this road."

The Hoolet and the De'il promptly made off, keeping a wary eye the while upon the advance of the enemy. Peter followed as rapidly as he

was able, shaking his stick at them each time they turned round, while the shrill scannel pipe of his anger fairly screamed anathemas. As often as he stopped to shake his staff at them, they turned to bay behind some whin bush on the edge of the moor, or lay flat among the heather, with only a lock or two of the indiscriminate thatch on their heads visible over the two pairs of bright and watchful eyes.

But as soon as the Hoolet and the De'il made sure that Peter was indeed on his way to their paternal mansion down by the edge of the Lang Wood of Larbrax, they both set off at full speed to carry the news to Rob Anderson, their father. He was a great, soft, hulking fellow, with a ruddy face of the most beautiful and manly type, broad shoulders, and noble blonde beard. When his daughter came in sight of her parent, he was engaged in the arduous occupation of sitting on a stone by the broken-down gate-post of the little cottage, and whittling with his knife a section of "bourtrees" into a practicable whistle for presentation to one of his offspring.

"Faither, he's comin'—rin an' hide!" panted the Hoolet, who had taken her skirts under her arm in order that her limbs might have free play in the race, and who in consequence arrived first. Because so soon as the De'il saw that he was to

be out-distanced, he stopped and searched about for the sparsely distributed stones on the edges of the moss for missiles to throw at his sister. For this was his idea of morality. He believed in woman keeping within her natural limitations. To pick up her skirts and outrun a male being was to break down the most ancient landmarks and to trifle with the moral law. So the De'il stopped and threw all the stones he could find at his sister.

But after all this was mere byplay. The De'il was bound to do something in person for the paternal honour. So he slackened off and let the master of Nether Neuk come up. Then he fluttered here and there and pretended lameness to encourage his pursuer, for all the world like a peesweep chased by a collie dog.

"Was't my faither ye were wantin'?" he queried, keeping carefully out of the reach of Peter Chrystie's stick.

"Aye, your faither—wha ither?" retorted Peter, trying to edge near enough to the De'il to get a good satisfactory "whang" at him. "Saw ye ocht o' Rab An'erson, lazy taed?"

He returned to his usual snarling whine at the latter words.

"Aye," said the De'il, coming so near that every moment Peter felt that before long he must

forget himself and allow his pursuer to approach within striking distance; "aye, my faither has been up a' this mornin', ever since risin'-time, looking the sheep on the Back Hill o' Bar-mark."

"Ye lie, Rab's De'il!" said Peter pleasantly, manœuvring for the upper side, while the boy finessed with subtle calculations as to the length of Peter's arm and his hazel staff when taken together.

Suddenly Peter struck. It seemed an easy shot, and with nine loons out of ten it would have succeeded. But not with Rab's De'il. For that youth simply removed himself two yards farther back, by some occult means which was not clear even to a close onlooker. He had been quite obviously within easy range. Peter's aim was accurate, his blow quick and well-timed. Yet when the hazel reached the place where a moment before the victim had stood, lo! he was not there. Instead, he appeared two or three yards farther up the hill-side, with his hands on his knees, "hunkering" a little. His wide lips were open, and his teeth showed at the wicks of his mouth, like those of a dog that has been kicked, and which means to take a more active part in the next act of the drama.

"*Ah-ah-hh!*" remarked Rab's De'il, and it was all he said.

But the tone in which he said it conveyed a whole world of contempt, defiance, resentment. An entire vocabulary of taunts could have said no more.

Peter Chrystie did not strive to recover his position. He turned away towards the door of the cot-house by the Lang Wood of Larbrax. He would go in, he thought, and see if the De'il had for once been correct in the statement that his father was away herding the sheep, as was his duty, on the Back Hill of Barmark. There was, indeed, hardly any chance that Rab's De'il spoke the truth. Still, such a thing might happen once in a way—as it were, by accident. So Peter Chrystie took the nearest road to the cottage, gritting his teeth with unsatisfied anger, and muttering sullenly between them, "Wait till I get ye, my man! Oh, wait till I get haud o' ye, Rab An'erson, lazy taed!"

As Nether Neuk drew near the door of the little "but-and-ben," he disturbed several broods of droopy chickens, scrawny, be-draggled, and scraggy for the most part, whose mothers were busily scratching for imaginary worms on mounds of loose *débris* which had already been turned over a thousand times in a like vain pursuit.

These motherly biddies drooped their wings and hoarsely "scaiched," as at sight of a hawk, when the master of the farm approached. Two or three mongrel curs, lurchers and collies with small claim to pride of ancestry, lumbered yelpingly out of the house or stood erect with their front paws on the dyke, ready to assist in repelling the enemy. But it was the Hoolet who stood most manfully in the breach.

"My faither is no weel the day," she said, standing with arms akimbo in the doorway; "he got a sair income in his side this mornin' on the hill, and he had to come hame and tak' to his bed."

"Humph," said Peter unbelievably: "let me see him!"

"He's verra poorly," persisted the loyal Hoolet; "he's no fit to be up. Ye micht no mak' a noise. The De'il and me gaed oot o' the hoose to let him ha'e some peace and quietness."

And so eager did the girl become that she actually took Peter by the edge of his coat-sleeve to keep him back, if only for a moment, in order that her father might have time to complete his dispositions.

"Let go o' my coat, ye besom," cried the angry elder; "the De'il's in the lassie——"

“Na, na,” said the Hoolet excitedly; “it’s no me that he’s in—it’s my brither.”

But Peter Chrystie was by this time within the kitchen room of the little cot-house. He went straight to the bed, which, with its solid four-posted bulk (a remnant of the better time, when Rab An’erson had espoused a wife “with furniture”), filled up all one end of the cottage. The huge form of the temporarily invalided shepherd lay stretched from corner to corner. Not even his head was distinctly visible, for a dirty blue quilt, which had once had a white pattern upon it, was drawn over all.

Peter Chrystie wasted no words. He did not condole with the sufferer, from whom, in the extremity of his distress, most melancholious sounds intended to be as suggestive as possible of groans of pain, continually proceeded.

The master of Nether Neuk simply lifted his stout hazel “rung” above his head and brought it down on the swollen and shapeless form which lay stretched on the bed. And as he laid on heartily, with all the strength of his willing arm, like a thresher on sheaves in a barn, he accompanied the exercise with appropriate excogitations.

“Ye great muckle fushionless sumph”

(*whack!*), "tak' that!" (*whack!*)—"and that!" (*thump! thump!*), "lyin' hulkin' there in your naked bed while ither folk are doin' your wark! D'ye think I ha'e nocht better to do, wi' a' this great farm-toon dependin' on me, than to be threshin' your lazy, guid-for-naethin' banes at eleven o'clock in the day" (*whack! thump!*)? "I learn ye to pretend ye ha'e an income in your side" (*thump! thump!*), "ye thrawn-faced, slack-twisted muckle haythen ye!"

But at this point Peter, by means of trial pokes with his unoccupied arm, suddenly discovered that he had been harmlessly expending all the pith and smeddum of his blows upon a certain judiciously arranged bolster, which Rab had accommodated to the ridges of his person at the points most liable to attack. Whereupon Rab's master, with a quick jerk of his hand, removed the bolster to the ground. His very next attempt got home.

"Ye menseless muckle hound!" (So the lecture proceeded, the stout hazel stick valiantly scoring the logical sequences.)

"Ow, ow!" (*whack!*) "Maister, mercy! mercy! I'm no weel."

"I'll learn ye to sup sorrow wi' a horn spune, ye de'il's birkie, howkin' here atween the bed-claes, when your yowes are faain' aval among the

ditches and your hoggs whammelin' in the black hags by the score!" *

"Ow, ow, ow! Maister, ha'e dune, ha'e patience! I'm a deein' man!"

"I'll ha'e dune wi' the like o' you, Rab An'er-son. Ye are eneuch to break the heart o' Job himsel'. Faith, it was easy for him to bide and be thankfu'—wi' a comfortable midden-heid to scart himsel' on, and the pat-stick to do it wi'! He never had the like o' you to break his heart, ye thievin' sorrow. Patience—I'll no ha'e patience till I ha'e broken every bane in your great lazy calf's body!"

* The farmer intimated to Rab that while he lay thus abed his sheep were lying helplessly on their backs and being drowned in moss holes.

CHAPTER IV.

THE NETHER NEUK LASSES.

When at last Rab An'erson was started by his master on a new career of diligence and probity (which lasted precisely so long as he was within range of Peering Peter's single-barrelled field-glass) he took the line of the hill-dyke with his dogs after him, striding onward in the most business-like way. But, sad to relate, so soon as he had reached the other side he plumped down, pulled the knife and the "bourtree" branch out of his pocket, and fell to work as before, improving and finishing the whistle which was destined to enliven the leisure of the De'il.

Here Rab sat contentedly till the afternoon was pretty well advanced. Then he went cowering down by the dykeside till he came to the edge of the hill of Barmark, over whose green-ribbed heathery expanses the sheep, which ought to have been his charge, were scattered. He sent one of his dogs scouring round the outliers of the flock,

and having made sure that no very large proportion of the animals could have wandered or been destroyed since his last visit, Rab came down the hill again towards the gate of Nether Neuk, with the wearied air of one who has been out all day upon the heather in the painful pursuit of duty.

“Ha’e ye ocht to eat, Clemmy?” he asked at the back door, having first assured himself that his master was not in the neighbourhood.

“I’m some dootfu’ that there’s nocht left, Rab,” said the nominal mistress of Nether Neuk, who was under the apprehension that Peter might come on the scene at any moment. She had already escaped one sufficient peril that morning, when she got the Hoolet and the De’il away from the door without her lord seeing the provender concealed under their ragged coats.

“Nonsense!” cried a brisk voice from the inner kitchen. “Of course there’s plenty o’ guid broth in the pot. Come ben, Rab, and ha’e a platefu’—and if my faither says a word, I’ll daud his lugs for him.”

And with these brave words there entered upon the scene Nance Chrystie, the eldest of the three daughters of Peering Peter. The Nether Neuk lasses—my heart is not yet so old but it beats at the words. For in those days the Nether Neuk lasses were the joy and pride of the parish,

the toast of every bachelor, and the mark of every eye, envious or admiring according to sex and age about the kirk door. In short, they were the three tricksome Graces of Whinnyliggate. At that time I was no more than the eldest son of a neighbouring farm-house. And I can vouch for the fact that it was no easy matter to be the son and heir of Saunders and Mary McQuhurr of Drumquhat.* But nevertheless, aided by good health, a sound digestion, and an excellent conceit of my own abilities, I did not demean myself so very ill, even in such an arduous situation as that of the eldest hope of a Cameronian ruling elder. I had been also one year at the College of Edinburgh, which perhaps helped materially, at least so far as the conceit went.

It had become my custom to go over every week to see the Nether Neuk lasses. This, in fact, was a practice somewhat common in the parish. And though I was the youngest swain on the muster-roll, I had not the least idea of being behindhand at the end of the day. But I do admit that my wooing was not encouraged by Peter Chrystie. For the canny old fox had a

* It may be well to say here that my name is pronounced "M'Whurr" by the elect and "Ma-Whurr" by the vulgar, with a burr like a grindstone. My father's farm meets the ear as Drumwhat, with a strong accent on the "what."

very shrewd idea that he would have no difficulty in marrying off his three bonny, blythe, and exceedingly well-tochered daughters. So in the meantime, and till the best of all possible matches should come along, it was his declared intention that Nance and Grace should remain in their several situations of housekeeper and cheese-maker to the farm-town of Nether Neuk. As for the Hempie, she was "but a lassie," and, in her father's eyes, did not count. In mine, however, she did—to begin with, at least.

It was Nance Chrystie, therefore, who now came into the kitchen of Nether Neuk, and whose bright imperiousness turned the scale in favour of the "Lazy Taed." For though Peter Chrystie ruled all others in his dominions with a rod of iron, his three daughters generally got their own way within doors. The one exception, concerning which their father stood firm as adamant, was that no braw wooers should be encouraged to come up the lang glen—at least, not without Peter's own sanction and good-will.

So the Master of Nether Neuk was on hand to bar the way with his shot-gun if he so much as heard of any birkies coming in the gloaming over the lea with intent to "see the lasses." And he admitted to the sacred "parlour" only the laird of Butterhole and the laird of Sourdubs—

two bien householders of about his own age, with bald heads and circumferences as comfortable as their circumstances.

And thus Peter, without intending it, made his three lasses the most popular young women in the countryside. Possibly they might have been so without his interference, for they were both wondrous blythe and wondrous bonny. But the difficulty of arranging a tryst with the Nether Neuk maidens, and the certainty of difficulty with their father in the event of a discovery, stirred the soul of every bold bachelor within ten miles with all the emulation of a knightly adventure.

Often it had been my fate to accompany the pick of the knight-errantry of Whinnyliggate on such quests—for, though Nance was about my own age, she had already become a reigning belle while I was but a halfling boy. There was, for instance, Allan Herd, the eldest son and heir of Herd of Herbishaw, a youth of fine athletic build and much caution in affairs of the heart. He had been for some time deeply (if temporarily) attached to Nance, whose scornful and often broken promise to meet him at the corner of the orchard, had not yet been fulfilled. Then, as it was unsafe to attempt the bold enterprise of Nether Neuk without reinforcements, Allan took

with him one Matthew Kerr, the second son of the Laird of Killoge Easter, a youth who was expecting his father to put him into a farm of his own at the coming Whitsunday term.

As for me, being no more than a lad of twenty, home from college and wholly without intentions, either of serious love or practical matrimony, I was at first but little counted on. Nevertheless, there was always the Hempie left for me. And that heavy-handed and free-spoken young woman was nothing loath to take a walk to the Wishing Well at the loaning end during the time that her sisters, Nance and Grace, were entertaining their swains of the evening at their own several corners of the orchard—fair play and no trespassing. I was not seriously concerned in the matter, though I envied Allan Herd more than a little. For Nance was the bonniest of the three, and though I was too young for her to notice me among so many bearded men, that fact did not prevent me from following her a little wistfully with my eyes.

It will easily be believed that every single man, woman, and child about the farm-town of Nether Neuk was perfectly aware of the evening amusements of the Nether Neuk lasses. But such was the fellow-feeling of the neighbourhood for the prosecution of the divine passion under



Nance was the bonniest.



difficulties, so universal the cult of "the canny hour at e'en," that not so much as a whisper came to disturb the mind of Peter Chrystie. He sat composedly in the "room" and sipped his toddy with the "gardevin" at his elbow, and the lairds of Sourdubs and Butterhole sitting opposite him, looking complacently at each other over their stomachs, like great red-gilled swallows out of their nests in the eaves.

"Whaur's Nance?" Peter would suddenly call out at the pitch of his voice to Clemmy, his wife, who was clattering pans in the kitchen in the final throes of cleaning up for the night.

"Can ye no answer me, woman?" he would shout yet louder. "Did ye no hear me speerin' whaur the lasses are?"

"What's your wull, gudeman?" the mistress of Nether Neuk would inquire, coming to the door, with the most innocent face in the world.

"Oh, the lasses, said ye—puir things! they are no through yet wi' their wark in the dairy. And as it's getting gye near the darkenin', dootless they are keepin' yin anither company. For as ye ken, young things are a' easy scared in the gloaming at bogles an' sic like!"

"Weel," said Peter, "gang your ways oot to them and tell Nance and Grace to come ben and

entertain their lairdships. An' bid the Hemptie gang up to her bed this very minute."

"'Deed, guidman, and I'll do that!" his wife would reply obediently, and forthwith return to the kitchen as silently as she came.

But unless the summons was made for the third or fourth time, Clemmy did not go the length of the dairy to inquire. Not till Peter, being stirred to wrath by the continued non-appearance of his daughters had started to his feet and declared that he would himself go and fetch them, would the loyal Clemmy hasten to break in upon the somewhat tart sweetness of Love's young dream, as it was being dreamed at the several corners of the orchard by Nance and Grace Chrystie. The Hemptie and I at the Wishing Well did not count. For we sat on opposite sides of it and threw stones and turf at one another—threw them to hurt too. This we did because we despised love—or at least the silly kind which requires the sheltered and sequestered corners of orchards for its manifestation.

"Lasses," at last Clemmy's voice would be heard from the byre-end, "ye had better be comin' your ways in. Your faither is on foot, and there's no sayin' when he may tak' it into his head to wander doon by the orchard."

This information was delivered, as one might

say, "at large." For Clemmy could see no living being through the dense leafage of the plum and "gean" trees, which, together with the nearer ricks in the stack-yard, hid Nance and Grace from hostile observation. As for the Hempie, she had pulled me down under the shelter of a wall at the first alarm.

"Wheesh, Alec," she said in my ear, "it's only Nance and Grace that are to gang in to entertain auld Soordubs and Butterhole. They dinna want me!"

But at this moment Nance, who was not in the best of humours at having to depart so inopportunately, cried out—

"Hempie, ye are to come your ways in this minute. Mind, I ken where ye are, and wha it is that's wi' ye. So ye had better be in your bed before I send my faither to ye."

"The besom!" cried the Hempie bitterly, pouting out her lip and stamping her foot in the shelter of the haystack. "I'll be even wi' her for that. Because she has to gang and flairdie * auld Bald-heided Dick, and Grace has to sit mim in the corner wi' gleyed Robin o' Soordubs, am I, forsooth, to come in and gang to my bed like as if I was a bairn playin' at 'Steal the Bonnets.'

* Flatter.

I ken brawly what it is. It's a' because ye've been at the college and Nance wants you, when she gets tired o' Allan."

And here the Hempie showed unmistakable tokens of "letting the tear doonfa'," so that in my inexperience I endeavoured to comfort her, by the methods usually approven in such circumstances. But I might have known better. For the Hempie promptly took me a ringing clout on the side of the head.

"Keep your distance, Alec, my man!" she said. "Arms about waists are a' verra weel for Nance and Grace that are silly craiturs and inclined to be daft aboot men. But I wad ha'e ye mind that I am no yin o' that kind—specially when I ken fine that ye like Nance better than me."

I had the good judgment within me to be silent.

"But I'll be even wi' the pair o' them, grown-up though they think themsel's," she continued.

At this point a plan came into my head, which made me ripple with inward laughter. I thought I saw my way to avenge myself upon everybody concerned—upon the Hempie for the blow with which my ear still tingled, upon Nance and Grace for interrupting my tryst, all for spite because they had to go in themselves; and a way

also to make Allan Herd and Matthew Kerr most frantically jealous.

“Hempie,” said I, catching her by the arm, “see here. Do ye want to pay back Nance and Grace for their trick?”

“Aye,” said the Hempie with great readiness, “I do that!”

“Then,” answered I, “leave the lang window o’ the ben room off the sneck,* after the lairds are awa’ and your faither is gane up to his bed.”

“What are ye gaun to do wi’ the lang window open?” retorted the Hempie with a quick look of suspicion. “Sit up wi’ Nance if she’ll let ye, I warrant!”

“Oh,” said I, ignoring the unjust accusation, “juist to come in and sit doon on a chair, and tell Nance and Grace that I ha’e come to inform their faither where they were the time he thocht them oot in the dairy—and what they were doin’!”

“Did they no see you wi’ me?” queried the Hempie anxiously.

“Na, they never saw me,” I asserted with truth and candour. It is always cheering, when one is lying back and forth, to come on one undoubted truth which can be made serviceable.

* Latch.

An extra emphasis on that seems to justify and verify all the rest.

The Hempie appeared to weigh the probabilities of success. She evidently admired the method by which I proposed to pay off our joint scores against Nance and Grace.

"I'll do it," she said, "if ye will swear to die and double die, if ye ever tell a living soul that it was me that left the window open."

I gave the terrible oath required of me, condemning myself to instant dissolution in the event of revealing the secret.

The Hempie's good-night consisted, as usual, of a sound smack on the cheek, which made my teeth chatter. To this (also as usual) I replied by snatching up a long stick, used for pulling down the hay from the stack, and giving chase. Half-way across the close I hit the minx as hard as I could across the shoulders. At least, I tried to do so, but that agile young lady promptly made a leap to the side, and the blow descended harmlessly on the flying skirts.

"*Um!*" she cried tauntingly, pulling a face from the embattled fortress of the front door. "Think you are Mr. Clever frae Clipcloots Castle, do ye? Man, ye are as blind as a bat and as gleyed in the e'e as daft Robin o' Soor-dubs!"

And in a moment more she was within the shelter of the house of Nether Neuk.

But I had not much doubt that after all she would keep her promise, and let me in at the long window after the coast was clear for my venture.

CHAPTER V.

WAGER OF BATTLE.

The window in question was a French one, which owed its being to the taste of a former factor on the Whinnyliggate estate, whose wife had been at a boarding-school for six months, and after that had come to Nether Neuk with romantic ideas. She considered that it would be a most pleasing thing to step from the window of her sitting-room out into the garden of roses, and there wander with the partner of her joys under a perpetual full moon. But half a dozen children and the necessity of making and mending for such a colony of sturdy rogues, together with the remarkable postnuptial partiality of her husband for the blaze of the fireside rather than for the chill breezes of Whinnyliggate moonlight, caused the long window to be less and less used. Yet under the star of the Chrysties, and especially since Nance and Grace had become so precious in the eyes of the youth of the parish

by reason of their father's jealous guardianship, the romance which, alas! remained an ideal to the factor's wife, had blossomed into a reality under the multiplied exigencies of the love affairs of the Nether Neuk lasses.

To this window, therefore, I stealthily went, and being but little more than twenty I naturally held all fair in love and war. And of a truth it was both love and war when one went to Nether Neuk, daring at once the fickle favour of the maids and the bell-mouthed muzzle of the master's blunderbuss. I had not, therefore, the least little delicate scruple about looking in through the opening between the curtains.

Peter Chrystie sat in the midst, toasting himself before the fire of peat, which already the chill air of the moorland nights made not unwelcome. He warmed his toes and sunned himself in the radiant heat of his own importance, also in the glory of having three bonny daughters, who, he well knew, were at once the best-toch-ered * and the most sought-after lasses in the parish—or, for the matter of that, in half a score of parishes.

On one side of him sat Richard Linton, the laird of Butterhole (otherwise and more widely

and intimately known as Beld-headed Dick), and on the other he was supported by Gleyed Robin, who to his patronymic of Taggart added the fat acres of Sourdubs and a conceit of himself broader than Galloway and deeper than the Solway in midmost channel.

Nance sat with her sewing in the chimney-corner by the side of the laird of Butterhole, prim and placid as though she had never dreamed of parting with a lad at the corner of the orchard less than ten minutes before. Her hair was daintily arranged, as if no hand had ever ruffled its placidity. And she nodded abstractedly to the stolidly complimentary remarks of Beld-headed Dick, as if the price of "nowt" beasts was her only thought, and the knitting of rig-and-fur stockings her sole pleasure.

To say that the attention which Nance bestowed on the laird of Butterhole was perfunctory is not only to make use of a very ugly but of a wholly inadequate word. The young woman simply answered "Yea" or "Nay" at random, and kept a steadfastly suspicious eye upon the laird's most delicate and intimate advances.

For it was Butterhole's custom, as the light wine of the country mounted to his head, to hitch his chair a little nearer to that of Mistress Nance Chrystie of Nether Neuk, who did not

at all relish the proximity. So that as he approached, Nance invisibly retired, till her stool was driven to the very extremity of the semi-circle about the fire, and she was in danger of being captured in the angle.

Then at the last moment, and having dallied with danger till it grew acute, upon the pretext of consulting her sister concerning the work on which she was engaged, Nance would slip round to the other side of the ingle and whisper into Grace's ear how "that doited auld fule, Dick Linton, would soon drive her crazy." Here she was wont to stay, keeping up a low fire of uncomplimentary remarks over her sister's shoulder till her father's voice recalled her.

"Nance, ye besom, what are ye claverin' there for? Gang ower by and enterteen the laird o' Butterhole. Do ye no see he is by his lane? Was it for this I payed good yellow siller for twa hale quarters to Miss McTavish at Cairn Edward for the feenishin' o' ye?"

Whereupon Nance, having confided a private pout of uttermost boredom to her sister, and shaken her fist behind the back of the unconscious laird of Butterhole as she passed, once more set herself down on her own side of the fireplace with a very ill grace indeed.

All this I could see and hear from the window.

The Hempie, having sallied forth again on her quality of mine own familiar enemy, stood by me and peeped also. And as there was but one good spyhole, we scuffled for the best place till Peter Chrystie looked suspiciously up at the noise.

“What’s that at the lang winnock, lasses?” he said. “No nicht-wanderin’ callants, I hope, Nance? Ye saw nane o’ that breed o’ cattle about the Nether Neuk this nicht, did ye?”

Whereupon Nance and Grace with the faces of the family cat after she has licked the cream off her whiskers, declared that they had observed nobody answering to their father’s description, “if it werena a mason lad gaun hame wi’ his square and mell* ower his shooder, and Ned Kenna the packman from Dalry linking awa’ to the change house in the clachan.”

“Oh, what a lee!” cried the Hempie suddenly at my elbow, and fled, leaving me, fixed and paralyzed, to face the wrath of Peter, the angry parent.

But I retired as rapidly as I could get my feet to pass each other, making a bee-line towards the wood at the end of the barn. In a moment the long window was opened from within,

* Mallet.

and the wrathful voice of Peter cried after me. He could not see my fleeing figure plain in the twilight as I sped across the open space of grass.

“Bang!” went a gun behind me. I heard the whistle of shot. Something stung me sharply on the cheek, and I fell forward on my face, giving myself up for lost.

Then, as I lay, I hoped God would forgive me for all the lies I had told, and for my other sins as well. I could not mind what these were particularly at the moment, because the thing on my ear stung most confoundedly. So I just slumped them all and took my chances.

I was lying still on the end of the wood, trying to think on my latter end and last Sabbath’s sermon, when someone came and caught me by the collar of the coat.

“Get up, ye great silly,” commanded the voice of the Hempie; “ye are neither dead nor like to dee.”

And in a moment I was on my feet again and ready for anything. I looked once towards the window, and there I saw old Peter, the tearing ettercap that he was, busily taking aim at me with the second barrel.

I was on the point of flying again to the defence of the orchard trees. But the Hempie caught me determinedly, reaching out a hand

from the dry ditch in which she was keeping out of her father's sight.

"Hunker doon here, Alec, my man," she whispered. "It's nocht but peas, ony way. I drew the lead pellets this very nicht, as soon as I had milkit the kye and carried ben the afterings to sup to my porridge."

"They hurt like lead draps," said I, rubbing my cheeks vigorously.

"Oh, ye will never dee o' a chairge o' guid saft garden peas!" said the daft lassie, scornfully.

"Maybe no," retorted I, for my choler was raised. "They are a' vera weel in broth, but if ye got them *plunk* on the jaw, wi' a strong chairge o' powder ahint them, they might bring the water to your e'en as well as mine."

"Hoot, man, ye are a cooard," said she; "ye mak' mair noise about a when peas than gin ye had been deid."

"I daresay," answered I, very shortly, "my cheek is a deal sairer than if I had been deid twenty year."

And I thought that I had somewhat the best of that, which cheered me greatly.

But I have yet to arrive at the wale of the story.

For when I had somewhat come to myself, I



"Hoot, man, ye are a cooard."

looked over the hedge at a place where I heard a noise. And there, lying on their stomachs on the fir needles, were Allan Herd and Matt Kerr. They were in a fine ecstasy of delight at my going up so innocently to the window to spy, and the old reprobate of a Peter coming at me right and left with his double-barrel.

Fine game they made, you may be sure, promising me that all the parish should hear of it on the morrow. And right well I knew that they were just the lads to keep their word. However, I chuckled a little too, for I had bethought me of a way to be even with them, and indeed, to pay all my various debts at one settlement.

So I wagered them a new hat and a new pair of boots apiece, to be bought at Robin Campbell's at the head of the street (mentioning the exact prices, in case of accidents or mistakes) that I would go in and stay an hour in the "ben" room of Nether Neuk that night, get three kisses of freewill and kindness from the lasses (the Hemptie being barred from the wager), and come out again on my own feet and quite unpropelled.

Allan and Matt thought I was only bragging, and so they were very keen to take me on. And nothing loth was I, for I had made sure of winning. And besides, Robin Campbell was my cousin and owed my father money, so he would

not dare to charge me very much siller for the hat and boots anyway.

These two, Allan and Matt, looked at me with a great increase of respect and admiration.

“ Certes, ye are a gye boy! ” said Matt.

“ A perfect reprobate! ” exclaimed Allan.

And that, when you come to think of it, was a good deal for them to say in my praise. For they were near half a dozen years older than I, and had had experience of this courting business at half the farm-towns in the countryside.

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CHAPTER VI.

WHAT CAN A YOUNG LASSIE DO WI' AN AULD MAN?

It was then that I bethought me of setting Matthew and Allan off on a ploy of their own to keep them out of mischief while I was attending to my particular business. Allan was the brisker lad, skilled in all rural arts—a fine ploughman, though the son of a comfortable farmer, with notions of his own about “hinting,” and (as one of the judges said at the Crossmichael ploughing match) the “maist oreeginal ‘opening’ to his furrows that was ever seen in the pairish—gin he had been a puir man’s son the like o’ that micht ha’e made his fortune, by exhibiting his gift in the neebourhood o’ Edinbra and Glesca and ither large toons, whaur they ken little aboot fine, thochtfu’ plooin’.”

It did not strike the worthy man that in these benighted cities they care just as little as they know about “hinting” or “opening,” or any other variety of ploughcraft.

Matthew Kerr was duller, but even he did not lack a certain slow and placid humour. For he played a good second to the livelier Allan, being ever willing and ready to follow; and when once fairly up to the eyes in any mischief, he saw the thing through with a grim conscientiousness which was often very effective. But that either of them should even themselves to Nance Chrystie seemed like the mating of the yoke ox with the wild deer of the hills. Perhaps it was with this in my mind that I sent them off on this ploy, which was exactly suited to their capacities.

“Lads,” said I, “what a spree wad it no’ be, if ye were to gang doon to the meadow-brig and lift it ower to the far side! Thae twa auld donnert lairdies will be gye and weel laden by the time they rise. What say ye, lads, to giein’ them a bit dook in the burn to cool their blood! —comin’ cookin’ after the lasses as if they were twenty the piece, instead o’ ha’ein’ near a hunder and forty years atween them. It’s their graves in the kirkyaird that they should be thinkin’ on, an no’ hirsling up aside sic bonny lasses as we ken o’.”

So in this way I got rid of these two simple loons, Allan and Matt. For, as I have said, I had been at the college a year, and they teach you a heap there forbye Greek. Indeed that was

about the only thing they did *not* teach—at least, so it was in my time.

From where I stood I could hear them go prancing down through the copsewood towards the bridge in the meadow; and I laughed within me as they went. For they both thought themselves so desperate clever—especially Allan—and looked on me as little better than a laddie. But if once I could get quiet speech of Nance Chrystie, I resolved to show them whether or no they could afford to despise Alec of Drumquhat.

The two lairds had stabled their horses over at Pate Tamson's public in the village of Whinnylriggate. Then they had walked amicably together to Nether Neuk. It was their purpose, upon leaving the house of their love-pilgrimage, to return by the same path to the village. It was but half-a-mile in length, and it led by pleasant flowery field edges, through the tall silver-shakers of the water-meadows, till finally it slipped unobtrusively between green hedges to the back door of the public-house of the clachan, where their couple of sober steeds awaited them.

Now Peter Chrystie did not allow late hours, not even when such peerless and approven suitors as the laird of Sourdubs and the laird of Butterhole came a-sweethearting to Nether Neuk.

“Lads,” he would say, “it's ten o' the clock,

and gin it is your habit to snore in your beds till the sun makes it ower warm to lie langer, it is no' the custom about this house o' Nether Neuk. There's Nance, noo, she canna lie muckle past four o' the clock. Daft helicat lass that she is, she likes a' mainner o' wark pitten by in the prime o' the morn. Fegs, I heard her wi' Tam Suitor, the plooman, the ither day. It's a grand bar, so I maun tell ye." ("Great lies!" remarked Nance unfilially, beneath her breath, to Grace). "Oh, a fine mistress o' a hoose will our Nance mak'. Tak' a pairtin' glass, lads; it's fine stuff, undutied every drap, and that strong and new it wad eat through iron plates. Weel, I was tellin' ye about Nance there—a brisk hizzy! She gangs up to the door o' Tam Suitor's loft.

"'Are ye up, Tam?' says Nance, gye and snell.

"'Na',' answers Tam dourly, frae between the blankets.

"'Are ye weel this mornin', Tam?' says the lass, kenning bravely that he was.

"'Aye,' says Tam, very unwillingly, but not knowing what else to say, silly cuif.

"'Then rise!' says she. 'For I like a' the beds made betimes in the mornin'.'"

"Haith, very weel laid on, my lass!" cried

the amorous laird of Butterhole, who was now on his feet, ready for departure.

“See their lairdships to the door, lasses!” commanded Peter sternly. “Guid-nicht to ye, Sourdubs. Guid-nicht, Butterhole. Haste ye back again, and mind and send me ower that tin o’ sheep-dip ye borrowed frae me at the last clippin’!”

Nance and Grace vanished before their heavy-footed woovers down the darksome passage to the kitchen, and immediately from about the red ashes of the fireplace Meg Coupland and Titty Muirhead arose, and with shawls belonging to their young mistresses over their heads, they slipped out to represent the two elder gamesome Graces of Nether Neuk.

The laird of Butterhole was in the mood for amorous confidences. He was still stumblingly feeling his way out of the ben room when Meg Coupland extinguished the candle in the hall. Butterhole saw the figure of Nance (as he thought) waiting for him in the dim doorway. Sourdubs was still wrangling with his host about the tin of sheep-dip.

It was Butterhole’s hour. Never had fortune and the tricksome Nance proved so unexpectedly kind to him. He slipped his arm about the waist of the maiden on the doorstep.

"Ye are an awesome nice lass," he said. "I like ye maist as weel's mysel'!"

"Ye think sae?" shyly came from under the shawl, in tones which might either indicate the embarrassment of extreme feeling or such mirth as hardly brooked suppression.

"Aye, lass, ye ken weel that I think sae; a' the world kens that," said Butterhole. "I aye said that there was never a lass to match ye for twenty miles round."

"Is that a' ye ha'e to say?" came softly from beneath the shawl. Meg Coupland was not new to the game of making reluctant love pin itself down to definite intention.

Butterhole was staggered for a moment, but he faced the situation on the whole very gallantly.

"Weel, lass," he said, "I was hardly that far on. But since ye are sae fond o' me, I wull speer ye. Wull ye hae me, lass?"

"Aye, that wull I!" responded Meg, in her natural voice, dropping the shawl and looking up at him with a smile which a circumnavigator would have had difficulty in tracing round her broad but expressive features—so pervasive it was, and, as one might say, circumferential. "Aye, that I will, laird Butterhole, and wi' pleasure. Ye can caa' in an' tell my

mither the morn's mornin' when ye are gaun by."

"What the de'il—Meg Coupland, as I'm a leevin' sinner!" cried the astonished laird. "I ha'e speered my ain cotman's dochter. Lord, I maun be desperate fu' surely. It's time I was hame."

And Butterhole stumbled out of the front door of the farm of Nether Neuk, followed by his friend and crony, who had at last settled the affair of the sheep-dip with his host upon mutual and amicable terms. Butterhole was pursued by the mocking scorns of Meg Coupland as he went down the loaning.

"Mind ye look in to see my mither the morn, and dinna forget I ha'e three witnesses that a' heard ye speer me," cried Meg, with jubilation in her tone.

"Guid-nicht, laird!" cried Nance, coming out of the kitchen, accompanied by Grace. "I wish you joy. It was very bravely dune, an' Meg will mak' ye a fine heartsome wife."

"De'il tak' ye, yin and a'—deceitfu' besoms that ye are!" retorted the Bonnet Laird. "Come on, Sourdubs. It will be a' ower the pairish the morn that I gaed courtin' Nance Chrystie o' Nether Neuk, and gat that fu' that I speered ma ain cottar's lass instead! I'll never dare face Cairn Edward market on Monday!"

“Hoot, man, haud your tongue,” said Sour-dubs. “I’m thinkin’ ye are maybe weel won aff. For gin it had been Nance, the wild madam that she is, ye wad ha’e had to tak’ her—aye, and put up wi’ her. Peter wad ha’e seen to that. But as it is, ye can gi’e that daft besom o’ a byre lass a pound note to let ye aff.”

“A pound note!” cried Butterhole, utterly aghast. “Surely a croun wad do!”

“Ye set yoursel’ at a very cheap price, laird,” said his friend. “D’ye think a lass wi’ a spoken promise and three witnesses will gi’e up being lady o’ Butterhole for less than a pound note?”

“Oh, wae’s me!” wailed Butterhole. “This comes o’ the cursed drink. I’ll sign the morn. A pound—a paper pound note! I’ll never get the better o’t. I wish I had minded me on what I learned at my mither’s knee. Mony is the time that she lickit me soundly for jingling the bools in my pouch, instead o’ attendin’ to her instructions, aboot religion and hoo to tak’ care o’ my siller. But I see my mistak’ noo, when it is ower late. . . . A pound note—a hale bonny pound note, black and crunkly and dirty——”

And the very imagination of his loss proved too much for the laird of Butterhole. He wept to think how he had neglected his parent’s exer-

tions for his edification, and how bitterly he had been punished.

At that moment the two cronies reached the bridge.

"Gang you first, Butterhole," said Sourdubs. "I canna see the brig. Ye ken the road better."

A splash followed, and then on the back of that a loud clap of swearing.

"What's wrang noo, laird?" cried Sourdubs. "What ha'e ye gotten there. No' anither lass surely?"

"Gin I am no mista'en, it's guid moss water," answered Butterhole. "But, faith, I was mista'en afore aboot the lass, and this may be but lang meadow grass after a'. Gi'e me your hand, Sourdubs, and I'll guide ye ower the brig."

Sourdubs reached a careful and cautious arm down through the darkness, which Butterhole firmly grasped.

"Noo tak' a fine lang step and ye'll be a' richt," said the pilot.

Sourdubs did as he was bid, and landed fair in the middle of the burn beside his friend.

"Noo, Sourdubs, ye'll be in a position to ken whether this is moss water or meadow hay," said Butterhole, with bitter sarcasm in his tone.

Speechless with anger at the trick, Sourdubs grasped his deceiver by the throat, and the pair

went to the bottom of the lane in their fury. They might both of them have been drowned, had not Matt and Allan fished them out and flung them on the farther bank, dripping like wet rags—yet ever continuing to vow the direst vengeance, and trying once more to grapple each other. Then Allan sat down to watch them, having quietly replaced the bridge, while Matt went to the village inn to bring their horses. Upon which, when they arrived, they mounted, and departed their several ways, pursuing each other as far as their voices would carry with denunciations and recriminations, together with direst threats of the pains and penalties of the law.

When they were quite gone and their angry voices had fallen into silence, Allan and Matt gripped hands in the darkness and clapped each other's backs.

“We are ha'ein' a grand nicht, Allan!” said Matt.

They were. But I was having a better.

CHAPTER VII.

ALL'S FAIR IN LOVE AND WAR.

And this was the way of it.

From my post at the window I heard Peter Chrystie moving here and there about the house, locking doors and barring windows—now shouting directions to the servants, now rating Meg Coupland for putting too many peats on the kitchen fire—“wasterfu’ hizzie, leavin’ as mony burnin’ there as wad cook a dinner for twenty harvesters”; anon crying directions to Nance and Grace, and finally, after he had retired for a quarter of an hour, opening his bedroom door to cry down to Nance to bring him his gun and powder-flask.

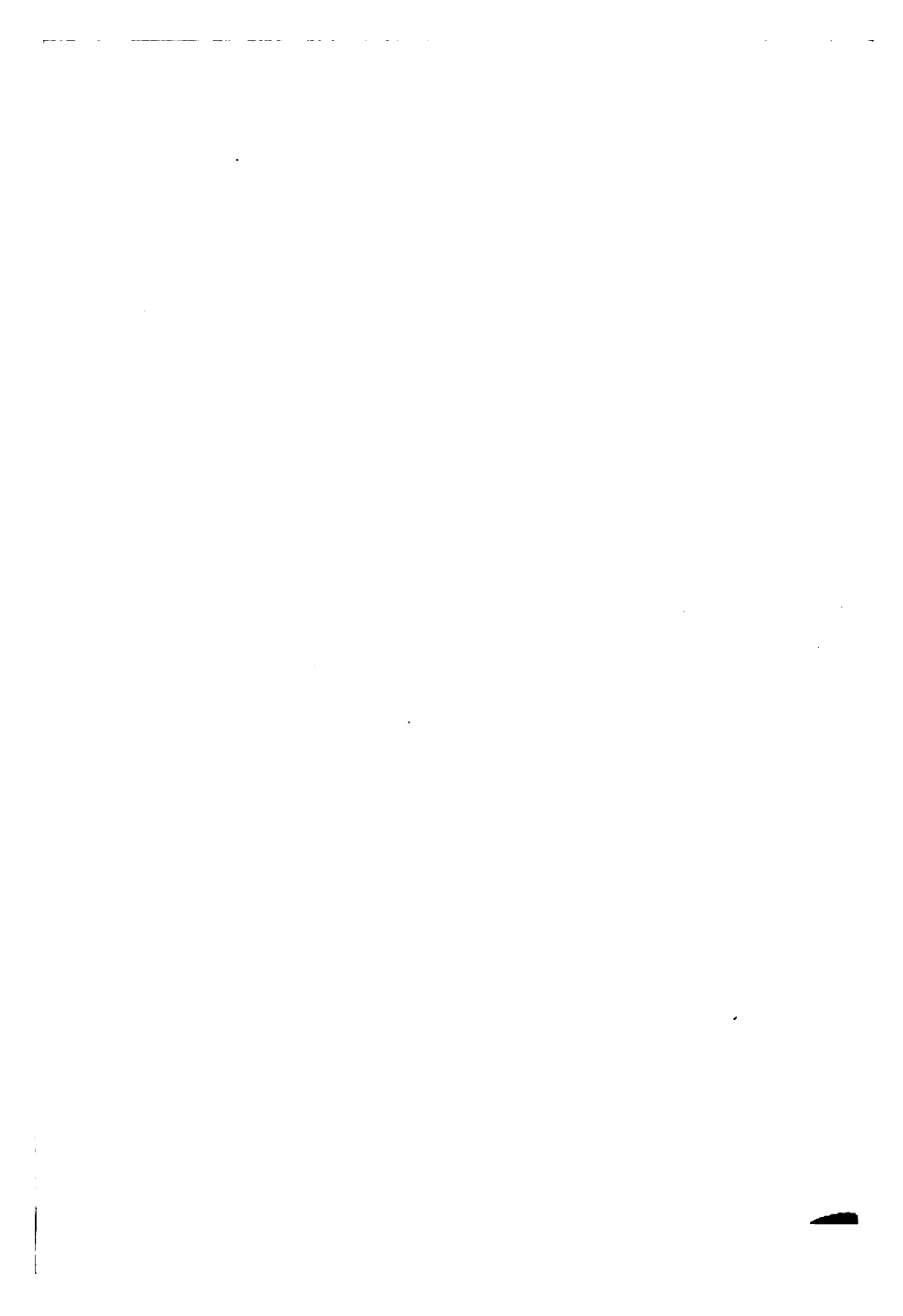
Then after a little Peter’s light went out, and presumably the elder of the kirk gave himself up to his devotions. For no sound was heard, where I stood waiting at the corner of the yard dyke, save the horses rattling their halters restlessly in the stables. A collie came and sniffed about my

legs. But it was Nance's dog Bawty, and Bawty knew me. He had certainly plenty of chances of acquaintanceship. Besides which the three lasses had carefully trained the Nether Neuk dogs to refrain from barking after dark, whoever should come about the premises.

After the master's retirement the house of Nether Neuk seemed to be wholly dark from chimney-top to front doorstep. But to the experienced eye a faint streak of light showed down the middle of the factor's wife's French window. This apprised the cognizant that the curtains were drawn in that room and that all the inhabitants of Nether Neuk were not so sound asleep as might be supposed from a cursory inspection of the premises.

Presently I heard a faint click. The streak of light brightened, flashed a moment, and disappeared, keen as a knife-blade fresh from the cutler. I knew that the Hempie had undone the hasp of the lock, and that the French window of Nether Neuk was ready to receive company.

Lightly I vaulted over the dyke, without disturbing a single stone (for in those days I was very quick on my feet), and stole like a shadow to the unlicensed entrance. As I had supposed, it opened at a touch and I stepped within, drawing the curtains close behind me.





"What are you doing there, Alec?"

The three lasses were sitting gossiping demure as kittens about the fireplace, as if it were the commonest thing for them to be thus employed on the further side of ten o'clock.

"Goodness me," said Nance, "what are you doing there, Alec? Laddies like you should be in their beds hours and hours since."

"He's comed to get you to help him wi' his lessons for the college, Nance!" said the Hempie.

"Ahint the orchard-dyke—wi' you for a tutor, mair like," retorted Nance.

"Wheest!" said Grace, looking up reprovingly from her knitting. "This is no the sort o' talk afore bairns like Alec and the Hempie."

Yet I was older than any of them.

"Where's Allan and Matt?" said Nance, after a pause, during which, as was my duty, I pulled a chair up close to the Hempie, who thereupon promptly hitched away from me with marked scorn. This also was strictly according to rule.

"Make yoursel' at hame, Nance," said the Hempie, turning up her nose. "See Alec, how friendly he is! He makes as free wi' the Nether Neuk chairs as if they were his ain."

"Aye, Hempie, he is as greatly in want o' mainners as he is o' mense. But what's come o' the ither lads I asked ye aboot?" continued Nance.

"They were feared to come near for the master's gun. So they gaed awa' doon the burn-side to convoy the twa lairds to the clachan," said I.

Nance and Grace looked up quickly.

"Are ye speakin' the truth, callant?" they cried with one voice.

Now they had no business to call me "callant," for I was as old as Nance herself and had much more experience, having been, as I mentioned before, a year at the College of Edinburgh. So when I answered them, I own that it was somewhat tartly.

"I telled ye that they were feared, and they are feared. Mair than that, I dinna think they cared muckle about comin'. I heard Allan say that there was just time to rin up to Knowetap to see the lasses there before they bedded."

"That's a great lee, at ony rate!" said Nance.

Which it was.

Nance rose and went to the window, letting a broad line of light flow out over the green space in front, scale the garden wall, and fade into darkness across the home park.

"Come back frae that, Nance," cried the practical Grace: "mind what happened the last time my faither saw a licht doon here after he had gane to his bed!"

For the Nether Neuk lasses had had more adventures in their time than were written down in the book of the family chronicles.

Nance swept the curtains behind her indignantly and tripped down the two steps which led into the garden. She was obviously annoyed at Allan's desertion, and ready for any reprisal which would pay him back.

Presently she came in again with a disappointed look and began to roll up her knitting. She looked mightily winsome as she stood there with the candle-light on her face and the little curls about her head all bright and fretful with the light shining through them. I did not wonder at Allan, nor, for the matter of that, at all the other men in the parish. Yet I knew very well that Nance Chrystie would not look at me—that I was but a lad—when she could get her pick of a score of grown men with beards to their faces as rough as a "heather cove." *

"It's time ye were tripping it over the muir to Drumquhat, my man. Your faither will be waiting up for you wi' an awesome biggie stick," said Nance pointedly. She seemed somehow to have lost interest in sitting up any longer. Yet when I came, she and Grace had evidently set-

* The besom for sweeping the ice in the game of curling.

tled themselves for a long forenigh of talk and work. They did not seem so set on it now.

It was high time for me to develop my batteries.

"I'm no gaun to steer a fit," said I; "no an inch frae this chair the nicht will I move, without ye come—a' the three o' ye, yin after anither—and gin me a kiss o' your ain free wulls."

A bombshell could hardly have caused more astonishment. Such an unblushingly impudent request had never been made in Nether Neuk since it was a farm-town. This was exactly the effect I intended to produce. At first the lasses did nothing but stare at me as if I had suddenly gone mad.

At last Nance found a tongue. She was generally first as well as last at everything.

"Get oot o' this hoose, ye young vagabone!" she cried. "You to speak about kissin' that hasna left the schule yet. It's a baby's feedin' bottle ye want and some lime-water amang the milk to keep doon the hiccups. Oot o' that window wi' ye, and gi'e us nae mair o' your brazen-facedness. Certes, they ha'e learned ye a bonny lesson of assurance in Edinburgh. If this be what your faither pays awa' his hard-earned siller for, Saunders McQuhirr's a sair ill-used man!"

I sat still, leaning far back in my chair.

"The nicht's young yet. It's six hours till rising time, and I can easily bide that time," said I.

"Gracie, Hempie," cried Nance, "get haud o' him. He's supple, but he's no strong. The three o' us can manage him easy. Round about the table and at him!"

Grace rose obediently at Nance's word, and I'm not denying that they might have managed the thing, had I let them try. For they had been used to hill-roads and indoor farm work all the days of them. But I had thought out all the chances, and had not come there to be so easily trapped by Nance Chrystie. Besides, I knew that the Hempie was too deep in the plot to assist them when it came to the pinch.

"Now, Nance," said I calmly, bending my fingers together in a persuasively determined manner, as I had seen Professor Mailsetter do when there was a disturbance in the back benches (and which I had much admired), "bide where ye are, and sit your ways down. For gin ye so muckle as lay a hand on me, unless it be to tak' me about the neck to gi'e me the kiss I was speakin' about, I'll raise a cry that will bring your father oot o' his bed like a shot. I'm nane

feared o' him nor his gun—like Allan and Matthew, mind you."

The lassies stopped at opposite ends of the table, and had I not been so set on my plot, I declare I could have found it in my heart to be sorry for them. For they had been so accustomed all their lives to hood-winking men and playing pranks on them—even as they had done that night to the laird of Butterhole—that it was fair gall and worm-wood to them to be caught by a birkie laddie; for so I knew they considered me, though of the same age as themselves. But I was determined to show them another way of it. I was not to be despised; and besides, if they had the good taste to know a lad when they saw him, they might see that I was at least as good to kiss as either Allan Herd or Matt Kerr. Or if they did not know this last, the Hempie could have told them. Anyway, I had said it and wagered it, and I was not going to go back on my plighted word at this time of day—or rather, by the hands of the clock, at this time of night.

CHAPTER VIII.

I MAKE LOVE IN EARNEST.

The lasses stood transfixed, and looked helplessly at one another.

“He’s awesome determined. Ye dinna ken. ’Deed ye had better just do it and let him gang his ways,” said the Hempie. “It’s no’ that very horrid, if yince ye ha’e made up your mind to it.”

And she was coming about the table to show her sisters the way, for the Hempie cared not a doit about the matter one way or the other. She would just as soon have kissed her father.

“Come back oot o’ that, Hempie,” cried Nance, forgetting about the necessity for quiet; “gin a sister o’ mine were to demean hersel’ to kiss a thing like that at the point o’ the bayonet—I wad——”

And the angry Nance stood breathless and speechless with indignation—as it were, reaching vainly into the empty air for a conclusion dire enough to suit her vengeance.

The Hemptie pouted, and stood balancing herself on one foot.

"It's a great to-do about nocht ava'. See here, Alec," she said, turning to me, "I'll gie ye three mysel' to let Grace and Nance aff, and to let us a' get to our beds."

But I had had more than three from that mint already, and it was not such-like I now coveted, the Hemptie being too young to have proper feelings about so important a matter. Besides, there was the wager and the victory over Allan and Matt, who were doubtless cooling their heels outside, and thinking themselves so mighty clever because they had ducked the two bonnet-lairds in the burn, which indeed they would never have thought of but for me.

So I shook my head.

"No, Hemptie. I wad like it weel—to obleege ye," said I. "But it's this way. It's no' that I care about the thing personally, as one might say. It's a vow that I hae ta'en, and I canna gang back on my word. I couldna gang afore the minister in the kirk on Sabbath wi' a clear conscience, if I were to break my word about a thing like that. It's what I hae said, neither mair nor less. Or I dinna steer out o' this chair till mornin'!"

"Aweel," said Nance, a new thought striking

her, "e'en let us gang to our beds and leave him here to himsel'; muckle good that will do to him, gin my faither catches him."

But I snatched the lamp and set it behind me.

"A' richt, lasses, gin ye like to leave the licht burnin' and the curtain open, it's a' the same to me. I'm no' feared."

And I swept the curtain of the long window back with my arm. The light lay in a broad bar across the fields, plain to be seen from Peter Chrystie's window. And Peter, as I well knew, did not pull down his bedroom blind.

Instantly Nance sprang at the curtain, snatched it out of my hand, and pulled it back again so that no light escaped.

Then she stood over me as I sat at ease—and the anger fair sparked and blazed from her dark, indignant eyes. She clenched her hands and held them stiff at her sides. Then she bent her head a little forward and looked at me, fighting for some adequate utterance. Oh, but she was splendid to look at! It was not the first time I had ever thought her the bonniest lass it ever was my lot to see.

"Oh, ye gorb, ye worm," she said, in a low voice of deadly anger, "ye fathom o' pump-water on end, I wish I were a man for but five

minutes to throw ye head-foremost oot o' the window—comin' here to fear three bits o' lasses. Ye may weel be prood o' yoursel', ye feckless scullion. Gi'e the like o' you a kiss!—faith no, though you waited till the Day of Judgment, and there wasna a man nearer than the stars that shine midway the lift o' heaven!"

But I sat tight and answered no word, knowing well that she would come in of that humour by-and-by. I was in no hurry, for I was quite sure of getting up into our gable loft before the time of my father's rising.

So I just leaned a little farther back in my chair and looked at her—and faith, but she was bonny far beyond words.

"Nance," said I, "ye should aye be raised and angry. It gars your e'en shine like stars on the water on a summer's nicht, dark and bricht at once—cauld as the ice-blink oot o' the north, and yet warm as a fire in the ingle-nuik burning for the first hame-coming o' newly-married folk."

"Humph. Set her up indeed—a' that aboot oor Nance's e'en. Ye never said the like to me!" cried the Hempie indignantly. "Ye can get Nance to open the snib o' the window to ye the next time."

And the Hempie, who up till now had been

taking my part in all good comradeship, tossed her head and turned away in a huff.

But though Nance did not abandon her attitude of anger, somehow the pith went out of it at my words, for I think that deep down she had always rather liked me. Her hands relaxed; she leaned back against the end of the table, and looked at me in a new way—the way a woman looks at a man whose heart is in her hands.

“But,” I went on yet more softly, looking at her critically as one might at a bonny picture, “I am no juist so sure that I dinna like ye even better when there comes a saft and kindly lowe o’ licht into your e’e. Aye, there it is—keep it like that, lass. It gangs richt to my heart, like the smell o’ hawthorn on a sweetheartin’ gloamin’——”

“Havers!” cried Nance, “I never listened to sic nonsense in a’ my life.”

But nevertheless she went smiling about the room, and then sat down with her elbows on the table and her chin on her joined hands, daring me with her eyes to continue. I resolved to show them all what a college education could do. Besides, as I have said, she was just terrible bonny, and I aye liked her, though I never had a chance to tell her so before.

Grace yawned and pretended to go to sleep

over her work—and the Hempie turned her back on me and undisguisedly sulked; and that pleased me best of all. For the Hempie was just a young ignorant lassie, and as fond of her dog Towser as of me—fonder indeed.

“ But where learned ye that mainer o’ speakin’?” said Nance. “ I declare I never heard the like o’ it before—never in a’ my life——”

And I could see her turning over in her mind the leaves of the many-paged book of her love-experience.

“ Gin that’s the gait ye talk to the Hempie,” she said, “ I dinna wonder that she bides oot so late. I am vexed that I bade her come in the nicht.”

“ Humph,” said the Hempie over her shoulder, contemptuously, “ and thank ye for naething—ye are mighty condescending, Nance Chrystie. It’s no’ to me that he would dare to talk sic-like sugary balderdash. Na, faith, he kens better. I wad gi’e him a sound daud i’ the lug.”

And so she would have done, as fast as look at it.

“ But ye see, Hempie,” said I, playing with her boyish ill-humour, “ it a’ depends. Nae man can cut without the claith. Ye canna draw a bonny picture without a bonny subject. So at least the painter lads in Edinburgh tell me. And

though ye are a nice lass, Hempie, and will be bonnier when your legs ha'e settled how far they are gaun to grow through the skirts o' your petticoats, ye maunna think that ye can compare wi' the sister o' ye."

The Hempie rose in great disdain.

"Sister or no' sister—ye can e'en sit up by yoursel' till mornin'. I'll no bide here a minute langer, just to listen to our Nance being cried up for the wonder o' the world."

And so, with her head erect, she marched out of the door, and we could hear her tramp up the stairs, without attempting to soften her footsteps, even when she passed her father's chamber.

Grace was now really and undisguisedly sleeping, without subterfuge or deception. But Nance sat opposite, watching me without ever looking away, courting me to go on with her shining, beautiful eyes. Yet I think it was not vanity, but the savour of a new experience that was so sweet to her. Also maybe she liked me more than she had let on to herself. Such things happen among lasses that are much made of.

"Nance," said I, after a while, "mind ye, though I cam' on a daft-like errand and made you fell angry at me, it wasna' for that I ventured here this nicht, but because I couldna' otherwise get speech o' ye. Nance, ye are far ower bonny

to waste your youth on a parcel o' ignorant plough-lads and country buckies, that ken nocht but the way the grape gangs into the tatie-furrow or the road the horn-spune tak's to their mouths. I am young, but I ha'e been in great cities and seen lasses that were counted bonny—yet as I live, never a yin was worthy to be your bridesmaid, no yin amang them a' fit to stand in satin and pearlins beside Nance Chrystie in a gown o' blue drugget."

"Siccan nonsense!" said she softly—never blinking or taking away her head, but just a pulse on her white neck beating slow, as if she was drinking a sweet beverage and wanted to make it last the longer. And it was then, I think, that some of the liking for me, that had long been underneath, began to win its way uppermost.

"True it is, Nance," said I; "and mind ye, I am no' talkin' this gate to every lass I meet. You can ask the Hempie if ever I spake this way to her."

"The Hempie is but a bairn," said Nance decisively. "But some lass in Edinburgh—ye maun ha'e said a' that often before, to get it so ready on your tongue, so like a buik that folk write about love."

"Na, na, lass," I answered her, "the love o' my heart has been gatherin' like water in a dam

—summer rain and Lammas flood filling it little by little. Nance, my lass, it has only overflowed this nicht. The mouth is just speakin' oot o' the fulness o' the heart. Ye think I'm only a lad, Nance—but I'm no gaun to bide here in the sheuch o' life a' my days. I'm gaun to be something forby a driver o' 'nawt' and a fodderer o' horses."

At this moment Grace awaked with a start, and slowly looked all about her with a bewildered air. Then, seeing Nance still sitting with her chin on her hands, she rose somewhat crossly, gathered up her knitting, and went towards the door.

"Ye can sit there till it be broad daylight, listening to Alec's clavers, gin ye like, Nance, but as for me, I'm off to my bed."

At her words Nance rose too. But she did not go away at once. She only leaned on the table with her palms behind her, and her eyes shone far brighter than the lamp as I saw them still turned on me.

"Sweetheart," said I, "will ye wait for me? Will ye believe in me?"

"Ye may come and see me again the morn's nicht," she answered softly. "And now slip awa': I maun gang after my sister."

There was a strange, misty light about her

face, a loving dimness beacons shyly in her eyes, and her lips were red like poppies among white standing corn—a rare thing to see, but when once seen never forgotten.

“And the three kisses,” said I, going about the table to her. “The rest ha’e gone and left us by ourselves. You must gi’e me them a’——”

“*Must!*” she said. “Is that the way you court a lass—to begin the very first night with *musts?*”

A flash of something that was not mirth, nor yet love, but akin to both, passed across her face.

“But——” she said, and then stopped, demurely.

I waited with expectation for her to finish her sentence.

“Yes, Nance?” said I inquiringly. But for a while she was silent. At last, however, the words came; and, for the first time that night, she looked away.

“If ye kiss as weel as ye court,” she said, “ye may gi’e me twa—and if I like them no that ill, I’ll see if I canna gi’e ye the last back again, just to be rid o’ ye.”

And so I did. And so she did. Then, the next moment after, I found myself fronting the darkness and the bite of the misty night air, with

a reeling brain and a stunned numbness all through me as if I had fallen from a great height. The French window was black and fast behind me, and I stumbled against the dyke in front without feeling it hurt me, like a man drunken—as indeed I was. For though I had kissed a many in my time, that touch of Nance Chrystie's lips ere she followed her sister Grace to bed was yet truly my first kiss of love.

CHAPTER IX.

THE AFTERCOME.

For a long time I stood, fixed and silent, leaning against the rough stones of the dyke, waiting for my love's window to light up. But though I waited half an hour or more, all the side of the house of Nether Neuk remained dark. Then I got a start. The night was still, and yet a clammy brooding of chillish mist had somehow filtered up from the east. An owl hooted vaguely far back in the woods, and then again the vault of night was lonely.

Suddenly a chill hand stole into mine, and I snatched my fingers away as quickly as if an adder had crawled into my palm out of the creviced stones of the dyke.

"Wheesh!" said a voice, low down near the ground. "They ha'e heard what you and Nance said to yin anither, and they are waiting down by the loaning fit to do ye a mischief."

"Who are waiting, and who may you be that

tells me so kindly of it?" said I, trying to pierce the misty dark.

"Oh," replied the voice, "I'm juist Rab An'erson's De'il, and my sister, the Hoolet, she is at your ither side. We ken a' about you and Nance. We saw ye gi'e her a kiss. But we'll no' tell. Dinna be fear't. But it's Allan Herd and Mathy Kerr, that's waiting to be upsides wi' you for makin' love to their lasses. Allan is as mad as he can be, and says that he will brain ye as readily as he wad stamp on a puddock, and Mathy says he'll help him to do it. So the Hoolet and me cam to warn ye."

"And we saw what ye got the noo frae Nance. But we'll no' tell," chimed in the piping voice of the Hoolet from the other side.

"Ye are guid bairns," said I, "and I'll no' forget ye."

Then I paused to think what I should do.

"Gang ower the dyke back, Alec McQuhirr," again the voice of the Rab An'erson De'il spoke in my ear. "Dinna be feared. Then the Hoolet and me will cry up to that auld Sawtan Peter himsel', and send him doon the loan to Allan Herd and Mathy Kerr. They lickit me wi' a hazel stick the last night they cam' by the Lang Wood o' Larbrax, but ye were aye kind to us.

And mair than that, Nance likes ye—at least, the noo!” *

Though the last clause was added as an afterthought, it was evidently a perfectly sincere tribute to the transitory nature of Nance's affections.

I withdrew quickly over the dyke, and slipped down the orchard hedge till I could see the house of Nether Neuk loom up like a fortalice, behind its beech-trees and the few domed haystacks which were all that remained of last year's crop. It rose white and still in the glimmering twilight, presenting a strangely military aspect with its rectangular shape, its barred courtyard, its barn loopholed as if for musketry—a legacy no doubt from the days, not so very old, when every hill-farm must keep its own cattle and be ready to stand a siege like a fortress, with no garrison but its own stalwart sons and able-bodied serving-men.

Waiting thus in the dark of the orchard angle I heard a stone tinkle against the glass of a window. Then there came a pause of silence. Again the pebbles jingled—a handful this time. The window was thrown up fiercely, and something white appeared thereat.

“What nicht-rakers may ye be that throw

* *I. e.*, for the present.

stances at my window?" cried the angry voice of Peter Chrystie. "A man canna get his natural sleep!"

"I'm just Rab An'erson's lass," said the Hoolet, in a weak voice, "and there's twa men doon at the loanin' fit lyin' ahint the dyke wi' muckle sticks, an' I darena gang hame."

The Hoolet had been put up to speak the piece, chiefly because the De'il was distinctly out of favour with Peter, owing to sundry acts of larceny connected with the orchard and garden.

"And what do ye here at this time o' nicht, ye gypsy—helpin' your lazy, ill-set faither to poach, nae doot. But at ony rate I'se get my gun and shift thae vaigabonds in the loanin'. They can be after little good."

Presently the front door was cautiously opened and Peter, with his gun held in the hollow of one arm, stole on his stocking soles past my place of refuge. I could hear him pant and wheeze as he went by, and a stream of oaths, such as ill became an elder, rumbled half submerged in his throat. His muffled footsteps died away on the short turf, and the next sound I heard was a loud rumble as the stones of the loaning dyke went rattling to the ground. This was followed by the noise of blows, a long thunderous blast of "language," the loud report of a gun,

and then, last of all, the clatter of fleeing footsteps. So I knew that Peter had fallen on the ambush which had been laid for me, and that he had dispersed the enemy with heavy loss. For there was no Hempie this time to draw the charge and to substitute the persuasive and succulent pea for the coldly imperious handful of lead drops.

“I’ll learn you to frequent the Nether Neuk without an invite, my lads,” cried Peter. “I’m thinkin’ I peppered the pair o’ ye where ye’ll ha’e some bother in scartin’. It will learn ye to come gilravagin’ about an honest man’s hoose, deprivin’ him o’ his nicht’s rest and gettin’ decent lasses an ill name.”

I lay still behind the orchard hedge and let him go grumbling home, muttering maledictions upon all lovers and other ill-designing night-rakers.

I had a long way to go, and it was already grey day when I got back to Drumquhat. And I did not like the feel of the place as I came up the loaning. It had a look as if somebody were already stirring, though as yet no smoke rose from the chimneys. For there is always a different look about a farm-town after the first person rises in the morning. Also the Drumquhat poul-

try were awake. They had come down from their sleeping-bauks and were contentedly picking about among the straw of the yard. I heard an unusual clattering in the stable. So without pausing to think, I made my way there, hoping to gain the shelter of my gable chamber undetected.

But lo! there was my father at the horse; and he did not even turn round when I came to the door. I saw Brown Bess look wistfully over her shoulder for the lump of sugar which I stole for her out of my mother's cupboard every morning. Finding, however, that her new groom did not give it to her, she jibbed restively and stood obstinately sideways. Next she tried slyly to administer a playful bite to her placid neighbour, Mary Gray, over the edge of the stall. But the resounding clap which she received on her flank, as well as a stern and sharp command to "Stand up there!" reminded Brown Bess that on this occasion she had to do with a Cameronian elder, and not with a mere adherent.

"This is a bonny time to be comin' crawlin' hame to your bed, my man," said my father at last. "Where ha'e ye been a' nicht? Is this what they learned ye about the college? There's enough by-roads to hell to be learned here in Gallowa', without payin' a' that siller to learn

them in Edinburgh. 'What ha'e ye to say for yoursel'?"

I had, in fact, nothing to say. So very discreetly I held my tongue.

"Wha has been wi' ye?—Ha'e ye been in ill company, Alec?" he went on, now working away at Mary Gray.

I had, indeed, been in company of the best, but I could not quite tell my father of it. So I said with much meekness, "I was ower by, wi' Allan Herd and Matthew Kerr, and I didna ken it was so late."

"Latel" cried my father ironically. "Faith, I wad caa' it early. An' no' that early, either. For I have a' your work dune, my sluggard. There's nocht left for ye to do, but e'en to gang your ways up to the stable laft and count your neckties. There maun be some score o' them—the spotted and the striped, the speckled, the grisled, and the ring-straked—more difficult to keep track o' than a' Jacob's yowes on the braes o' Padan-Aram!"

In the kitchen I met my mother. And that was a thousand times worse than coming on my father in the stable. For she stood and looked at me for all the world as if I had committed a murder, and had come home with the officers of justice hard on my trail.

“ Oh, Alec, ye’ll break your mither’s heart wi’ your ongangin’!” she said, clasping her hands pitifully. “ Ye ha’ena been in your bed this nicht. Where ha’e ye been? Your faither is in a terrible state about ye. What for canna ye bide decently in your bed and tak’ your sleep—and no’ ha’e to gang about a’ the day blinkin’ like a hoolet that has lost its road hame?”

“ Oh, mither,” said I, “ dinna be feared. I ha’e juist been ower by wi’ Allan and Mathy.”

“ Allan and Mathy—a likely tale!” cried my mother, working herself up, “ ragin’ and tearin’ about the Nether Neuk, mair likely. Oh, Alec, if my eldest son is to turn oot a prodigal amang the swine-troughs, I dinna ken what I shall do. Ha’e ye fed the pigs?” she continued, as if the mention of the prodigal had called up an appropriate subject.

I went to the great boiler in which the pig’s meat had been put to simmer the night before, and, having filled two buckets of the stuff, I carried them across the yard to where in the styes the porkers were already leaping up with their forefeet on the doors and singing a shrill morning invocation to the gods of the belly.

When I had come back and sat down to the porridge which my mother had ready for me, I could hear her and my father talking together

in the little back room which opened off the kitchen.

Strange to say, it was my father who was defending me. I could hardly believe my ears, for Saunders McQuhirr had been twenty years a consistent Cameronian elder.

"Hoot, Mary," he was saying, "what for do ye make sic a mourning, a' about the laddie steppin' oot for a quiet hour at e'en, as ithers ha'e dune before him? If the lasses are decent lasses, let him e'en ha'e his blink. Ha'e ye forgotten how mony and mony a time somebody cam' doon to meet me langsyne, at the darksome road end where the Shirmers' loanin' begins to wimple up the brae?"

But my mother could not yet take that view of it. She declined to recall old memories, and instead confined herself to my present and actual transgressions—which, indeed, were patent enough.

"Saunders McQuhirr, I wonder to hear ye," she cried, "and you an elder o' the kirk—up-haudin' the haverels o' thae Chrystie lasses—aye, and evenin' them to your married wife. It'll never be wi' my guid-wull that Alec marries ony yin o' them."

"Mary," said my father gently, "gin Alec left the task o' looking for a wife to you, he

wad ha'e a fine chance o' ganging a bachelor to his grave."

"Oh," said my mother, "ye make a mistake, guidman. I'm no' again marriage in the general——"

"No, Mary, only when it comes to be your ain son that slips oot to see his lass—then ye are again it in the particular," quoth my father, with more wit than discretion—as, after thirty years of experience, he might have known. But when it comes to a domestic debate, the wisest and most experienced man finds that his unruly evil is infinitively more restive than he had supposed.

"But I'm tellin' ye, Saunders McQuhirr," cried my mother. "Tak' my word for it, thae Chrysties will never mak' guid wives to ony man. The very last time I was up at the Neuk, guess ye what I saw. The three o' them wi' their company goons kilted to their waists, milkin' the kye in the gloamin' in their braw, striped petticoats, and a great silly gomerall o' a lad at every cow's tail plaitin' it into strands and tiein' it up wi' ribbons. I defy ye to say that ye ever kenned me at ony sic daft-like ploys in *my* young days?"

My father laughed a little. I liked to hear him laugh like that. I kenned now why those

who for their misdeeds had to appear before the sessions, were so keen to have him there when their cases were dealt with.

“ Mary,” he said softly, and I’m sure (though I could not see) that he had his arm about my mother’s waist, “ Mary, how was it then—can ye mind?—that the twa luggies o’ new milk were spilled at the corner o’ the Shirmers’ byre, when ye were carrying them into the milk-hoose—aye, and that within ten yairds o’ the brass buttons on the back o’ your faither’s coat, decent man? ”

There was no reply for a moment, but a curious silence instead. Then I heard my mother say, “ Weel, Sandy, I suppose it was because the brass buttons were on the *back* o’ my faither’s coat.”

Then there befell another and a longer silence in the little ben room. And presently my father came out.

As he passed me sitting dejectedly enough at my porridge, he gave me a bit clap on the shoulder.

“ It’ a’ richt,” he whispered. “ Gang ben and mak’ it up wi’ your mither.”

And I declare his kindness came over me like a wave. I was ready to greet like a bairn. If there lives a better man than my father in broad

Scotland I have yet to see him. And even as he had said I found it easy to make my peace with my mother.

But after all was over and the treaty signed, my mother, as was her nature, could not forbear a parting word.

“Gin it’s to be a Chrystie,” said she, “I hope it’s Grace, for she’s the doucest and has least to say.”

“Gin it’s a Chrystie,” said I in answer, “it’ll be Nance—that is, if she’ll ha’e me. For she’s the bonniest.”

“Beauty is but skin deep,” quoth my mother wisely.

“Maybe,” said I, stroking her cheek, which was yet smooth as an egg, soft as a peach, and for all her years and her bairns had the red blood still mantling bonny in it—“maybe, mither; but what the waur are ye o’ your skin keepin’ its beauty like that o’ ony young lass in the pair-ish? And richt prood are your guidman and your weans of it. Surely ye are nane the waur a mither for being bonny to look at, mither mine!”

And I leaned over and kissed her.

She gave me a gentle push, actually blushing a little, but none so ill-pleased, and taking it well.

“Gae ’way wi’ ye, Alec,” she said. “I declare

ye think ye can flairdie and come ower your very auld mither wi' your slee fleechin' tongue. Keep thae sayings for Nance Chrystie, for I'm lang past carin' for sic talk—doon-richt flattery, I caa' it."

And my mother complacently settled her cap on her head and took a look at the cracked bedroom glass.

Then, as she went out of the door, she said, a little thoughtfully, "I'm doubtfu' that ye are your father's ain son, Alec."

"And as far as I ken I couldna be connected with a better man!" I replied.

But what that had to do with the case I know not, saving that my mother's saying about my father may possibly throw some light on a Cameronian elder's manner of wooing—a recondite and much-disputed subject.

When I went to see Nance on Wednesday night, the Hempie met me at the loaning foot.

"Nance is in there," she said pointedly, but not spitefully, nodding her head in the direction of the orchard, "and I'm gaun a walk wi' Allan Herd. He's far better-lookin' than you ony way, and he thinks me bonnier than Nance."

So I met my love in the shade of the great apple-tree, where the foliage and the ivy make a gloom deep as a cavern, and where the lower

boughs are spread along the wall like a cushioned seat. There I took up the subject again and told her how I loved her. And only after an hour of it did I pause a moment for breath.

“Go on,” said Nance, without raising her head from where it had been resting, but giving me a push with the side of it so that the curls about her ear (the daintiest brown things in the world) tickled my neck.

“But that is *all* Nance,” said I, looking down and touching the tangle of her hair where it pretended to part in the middle, but did not—“what else is there to tell you?”

Nance gave a little happy sigh and nestled contentedly lower—on the apple-tree bough.

“*Then just tell it me all over again from the beginning!*” she said.

CHAPTER X.

THE HONOURABLE SOPHRONIA.

It is not to be supposed that the Hempie sat quiet and resigned under all this. Indeed, the expression of scorn which signified itself by the elevation of that young lady's nose in the air, became so pronounced when I chanced to pass her, that the bridge of that organ was in danger of growing permanently parallel with the roofs of the outhouses of Nether Neuk, while the tip pointed almost permanently to the zenith.

Nor was this owing to any sense of injured beauty or wounded self-love. What the Hempie felt most keenly was the desertion of a comrade. I had been untrue to our bond. Forewarned as well as forearmed, I had fallen a willing victim to arts which, seated side by side at the well, she and I had often flouted and despised in company.

As a general rule, during these first days of my declared love for Nance, the Hempie avoided

me. She had a peculiarly effective and ladylike way of doing this. We met, let us say, in the green lane which meanders towards Nether Neuk from the direction of Whinnyliggate and Drumquhat, as if it had no particular intention of ever getting there or indeed anywhere else. During part of its course, this by-way has no boundary but the pasture-fields where Peter Chrystie's cows are for ever either busily cropping, or meditatively chewing the cud. If I chanced to meet the Hempie on this part of the thoroughfare, she would walk straight towards me, staring through and beyond me as if she had no notion that any human being was in the vicinity. Then, when about ten feet of distance separated us, and a collision was imminent, she would, so to speak, suddenly become aware of my proximity. Whereupon she would instantly draw her skirts aside from any possible contamination with the loathsome thing in front of her, at the same time elevating her nose and depressing, correspondingly, the back of her head. Then she would wheel sharply round and strike across the fields at right angles to her former line of march. There seemed to be some reason for calling this the Cut Direct.

Nor was this method only of use when circumstances were so entirely favourable as in the

green lane, with all the cow-pastures on either side upon which to steer a tangential course. I met the Hempie one day in the narrow pass between the low foot-hills of the pig-styes and the unassailable precipices of the barn gable-end.

“I have her this time!” I chuckled to myself—somewhat hastily, however.

But I had not. I did not know the Hempie.

On she came, gazing unconsciously into space somewhere about a hundred miles in the rear of my head. We arrived at the regulation distance from each other. A spasm of disgust passed over her features. “What!” (she seemed to say)—“is that a toad I see before me?” Her very nostrils grew voluble with loathing.

Instantly one hand grasped the virgin skirt, severe, frugal, incorruptible. Once more the Hempie wheeled sharply to the left, sprang with one fine flying leap upon the wall of the nearest pig-stye; then, marching majestically erect over the roofs of the others, she ascended the rigging of the byre like a cat, grasped the branches of the pear-tree which reached over from the orchard, and swung herself gracefully down out of sight, upon the farther side.

I was left standing speechless yet eloquent with astonishment—turned as it were to stone in my tracks, gazing incredulously after her.



Marching majestically erect over the roofs.



I asked Nance how the Hempie treated her.

“What!” she replied in some astonishment—
“the Hempie? I never noticed. What does it
matter *how* the Hempie treats anybody?”

It was the voice of nineteen speaking of fifteen when both are sisters. But not thus cavalierly could I afford to treat the Hempie. Had we not been of a long season friends and comrades? Besides, she knew too much; and, however un-Hempie-like the action—yet in some access of jealous fury, she might possibly divulge to Nance that which she had received from me under trust.

For—I blush to say it—I had romanced somewhat freely.

It had fallen out in this way. Nance and Grace were (let us say) in the byre at the milking, with the servant lasses to assist them, the particular attendant swain on duty that night being at his post behind each cow's tail. Or the two elder maids walked up and down, arm in arm for mutual protection by the orchard wall, Allan and Mathy on either side (but not making much of it). Then it had been our custom—the Hempie's and mine, that is—to sit down by the well, swing our legs comfortably over the stone kerb, and rail at love.

“How much better it is, Hempie”—thus I

would begin—"for you and me to sit and talk about Princes Street Gardens, and—and the Wars of the Roses" (the Hempie was fond of history) "than to be aye trying to squeeze one another's hands."

"I would just like to see ye try!" said the Hempie, with unnecessary truculence.

"And more sensible-like, more improving to the mind," I continued. "O Hempie, after all, you and me are the only sensible folk! Not but what I have tried the other way of it in my time. I have been fair sickened with it in Edinburgh, Hempie. And I can testify that love is nocht but vanity."

"And vexation of spirit, as the minister says!" continued the Hempie demurely.

I glanced at her sharply. It was surely not possible that the lassie was laughing at me—me, a man of such experience?

"Go on," she said, knuckling little stones at a puddock, which (like a person contemplating matrimony) could not make up its mind whether to jump into the well and be unhappy, or to stop outside and be unhappy—"go on; tell us about some o' your Edinburgh madames."

"Oh, that," said I modestly—"that's all nonsense."

And it was—also lies.

“Tell us about the Professor’s daughter; or, no, about the Honourable Sophronia—that’s the best o’ them a’.”

She had them all by heart.

“Well,” I would say, speaking slowly—for the reason that it was necessary to walk carefully and bethink myself, before beginning to retell the tale of the Honourable Sophronia, or any other (the Hempie standing no nonsense about discrepancies), “the way I came to be acquainted with the Honourable Sophronia was this——”

“Drive on, man!”

At this point I produced a peppermint as a sedative. It had been a long time in my trousers’ pocket, but the kindly twilight covered all deficiencies. I went on as soon as I heard the Hempie sucking steadily. Then I knew that she had got over the first coating, which I feared might have been flavoured with fish-hooks—also worms. But it was all right. I will say this for her that there was no mim-mouthed squeamishness about the Hempie.

“Well, let me see, it was at the kirk that I first made the acquaintance of the Honourable Sophronia——”

“What kirk?” asked the Hempie. Though she knew better than I—much better.

“The kirk that I always attended,” I replied,

with dignity. "Her father is an elder. He is an Earl——"

"Ye said a Marquis last time, and a Lord Advocate the time before!" cried the Hempie unkindly.

I waved my hand to show that the difference, even if it existed at all, was too trifling for debate.

"He lived in Edinburgh to be near the Parliament——" I was going on smoothly now, having got a lead.

"I thocht ye telled me that the Parliament didna sit in Edinburgh now, but in London—in the Tower, where all the Kings and Queens go to be born?" interpolated the Hempie.

"How am I ever to tell you the story if you keep on interrupting like this with your silly questions?" I demanded severely.

The Hempie was penitent.

"I only wanted to ken!" she answered humbly, taking another shot at the puddock with a bigger stone.

"It wasna Parliament but Parliament House he lived in, if ye had let me finish. Sophronia's father was a Lord o' Session."

"I thought ye said a while since that he was an Earl?" again interrupted the Hempie.

This was too much.

“ Did I not tell you that Sophronia’s father lived in the Parliament Hoose, because he was the head lord o’ them a’—and he is always a Earl, *by virtue of his office!* ”

I said these words triumphantly, as well I might. I had got the phrase that time. The Hempie was much impressed.

I pursued my advantage during the interval of silence which succeeded.

“ Well,” said I, “ this earl of session——”

“ Was it a Kirk Session?” interjected the Hempie.

“ Hempie!” I cried sternly, making as if I would rise from my seat, “ I will tell you not a word more—not one word!”

“ Weel,” said the Hempie, still more humbly, “ I’m sure I didna ken. Ye said yoursel’ he was an elder.”

“ Maybe you would like to tell the story yourself, Hempie!” retorted I, sarcastically. For sometimes I knew that I had to be severe with her.

“ That I would. I could get on a heap faster!” cried the misled lassie, her impudence rising instantly, Phoenix-like, out of the ashes of her contrition.

After this she permitted me to proceed some little way without further articulate cavilment.

"I met the Lady Sophronia——"

"Ahem!" said the Hempie.

And then she pretended that she had choked upon the peppermint I had given her. But I knew better. Peppermints only last three minutes with such suction-power as the Hempie's, and it was more than five since I had given it her. She meant that I had called the heroine the Honourable before.

"I looked long and severely at the Hempie, but she only coughed and patted herself on the back—a poor, poor subterfuge, quite patent to me.

"As I say, I met the Lady Sophronia"—(I paused for objections, marking the emphasis in a defiant way: none were lodged) "at church. I was in the front row of the gallery. She sat below in the area. She looked up and winked. I looked down and smiled."

The Hempie help up her hand, and cracked her thumb and middle finger like a boy at school when he would attract the teacher's attention and dares not speak.

"Well, Hempie?"

"How could she wink up? She must hae gotten an awesome twist in her neck!"

The Hempie tried the gymnastic and nearly fell into the water.

“Well,” said I tolerantly (for it is wise to make these little concessions sometimes), “perhaps it was the other way about, and it was I who winked down, and the Lady Sophronia who smiled up!”

“Oh!” said the Hemptie contentedly, and swung her legs rather more widely.

She had not hit the frog yet, and he, on his part, had not made up his mind about the leap in the dark. After all there was the getting out again, which, like finding the end of a story you have made up and then forgotten, is not such an easy matter as going in.

I also proceeded with circumspection, sounding as I went.

“So when we came out of the kirk, her father having stopped to count the collection, I says to her, says I, ‘How do you do?’ And she says back to me, ‘How do *you* do?’ And that was the way I got acquainted with the Lady Sophronia!”

I looked keenly at the face of the Hemptie, to see if I had told the tale in this manner the time before. But the little monkey sat as demure as a pussy-cat in a creamery where she is supposed to feed on the rats she kills, and said nothing.

“So of course after that we knew that we loved one another!”

"That was rather quick," said the Hempie. "How on earth did ye ken so fast? I hae said 'How do you do!' to mony a body, but they never took it for granted that I loved them. Na, and blessed weel was it for them that they didna," continued the Hempie, "I wad hae ta'en them a most almichty rattle on the jaw if they had."

"Ah, but you see it was not so much the words themselves as the way she said them, and the bonny smirkin' smile she gied me, Hempie."

I illustrated the smile.

"It makes you look very unweel—like our wee black calf that died o' the bowel complaint!" said the Hempie, looking critically at me.

Now this was decidedly damping—but after all the romancer must meet his trials somewhere; and the pleasure of creation is, when all is said and done, its own great reward.

"So as soon as the Lady Sophronia and I knew that we loved one another, we arranged to get married."

"Dear me. Was that no' hasty?"

"Oh," said I airily, "I was a young fool and kenned no better! I just did it for the experience, and because the lass was so desperate keen to get me."

"And what way did ye take to get married?" asked the Hempie.

“O that!” said I. “I juist asked her to meet me on Saturday afternoon, and take a walk on the Calton. For that was the day she could most easily get away from the boarding-school and me from the college.”

I saw the query about the boarding-school in the Hempie’s face, so I dodged under it, and hurried on. For I knew that the boarding-school was a new and untried inspiration.

“Is the Calton Hill the place where folks get married in Edinburgh?” she asked.

“No,” said I, “though no doubt it is often so far on the road. But ye see it’s nice and central, and there’s a fine cheap confectioner’s shop handy, at the very foot o’ the steps.”

This told on the Hempie at once. I saw her wishing that she lived nearer the Calton. The confectioner’s shop might, in time, modify her ideas even of love and matrimony.

“So,” said I, “the Lady Sophronia and I——”

“Call her the Honourable whiles, Alec,” pleaded the Hempie, “juist for auld sake’s sake, and to show there’s nae ill-feelin’!”

I scorned to take the least notice.

“Well, we met on the Calton on Saturday, as I say. It was a fine day, and the clouds——”

“Never mind the clouds! Drive on wi’ the

story!" cried the Hempie hastily. She hated descriptions of scenery in romances. And small blame to her.

"It was a fine day," I continued more deliberately, "and Sophronia and I walked together, hand-in-hand."

The Hempie set hers one above the other on her druggot bodice a little above the waist, and turned up the whites of her eyes to express cynically her idea of the rapture of love's young dream.

"And so I told her as we walked about the law of Scotland—and how ye can be married by declaring yourself man and wife in the presence of three witnesses."

"That's easy! Let's!" said the Honourable Sophronia."

The Hempie looked pleased at the name. It was like old times.

"So I said that I loved her to distraction, but alas! I had only twenty pounds a year to pay my fees and keep myself at college.

"How much are the fees?" asked the Lady Sophronia.

"Eleven pounds, and a pound for the library ticket; but ye can get that back after a week!" said I, plucking up a little heart at the last item.

“The Lady Sophronia appeared somewhat disturbed. But presently her face cleared, and she sighed.

“‘After all, that leaves eight—no, nine—pounds, for cakes and candy!’ she said.

“So after that, of course, as a gentleman, I could make no further objection.

“Then we set out to find our three witnesses. At first we could see nothing but half-a-dozen bairns, playing at marbles.

“‘These winna do!’ said I to the Honourable; ‘they are under age.’

“‘So are we!’ said Sophronia instantly—as if it had just occurred to her.

“‘*That* does not matter!’ I answered cheerfully.

“There were also a pair or two of lovers walking about like ourselves, trying their best to keep out of each others’ way.

“I proposed that we should take a few of these into our confidence, as presumably possessed of a fellow-feeling for our distress. But the Lady Sophronia was markedly opposed to any such course.

“‘They might want us to be witnesses to their marriages, and it would never do to mix things up in that way,’ she said.

“So, as there was really something in that, I

fell again into the depths of despair, till I be-thought me of the old pensioners who take care of the National Monument. There were three of them in my time.

“So we went to the Monument and Sophronia and I explained to them what we wanted. The whole three looked very unsympathetic, till I proposed to give them a shilling each for the job. But Sophronia whispered that sixpence was quite enough, and that we could spend the other eighteenpence at Ritchie’s after we were married, on our marriage breakfast, as it were—which, when you come to think of it, was decidedly moderate. It was strange how calm and business-like dear Sophronia was, even in that supreme moment.

“So I fixed it at sixpence each, and handed over the cash. Whereupon a kind of mitigated and chastened second-class joy pervaded the wooden countenances of the three pensioners, as each man of them mentally expressed his acquisition in terms of black twist tobacco.

“Then I explained all over again how Sophronia and I desired to be married, and needed three witnesses to do it in style.

“‘Of course,’ I said, ‘we could have any one we wanted for witnesses. We are not making any secret of our matrimonial intentions. Don’t

imagine that!’ For I thought if they had any idea that there was secrecy in the matter, they might strike for more pay, or even blackmail us afterwards.

“ So I waved my hand towards the city.

“ ‘No,’ I said, ‘ we merely came up to the Calton by our Doctor’s orders, because it is a quiet and healthy place to get married!’ ”

“ Then Sophronia and I solemnly declared that we were man and wife according to the formula, and the pensioners retired with their sixpences.”

“ Did you kiss her? ” asked the Hempie suspiciously.

“ Kiss her? No. What in the name of fortune would I want to be kissing her then? Were we not man and wife? ”

“ Of course—I forgot! ” said the Hempie, much subdued by her blunder.

But immediately a new horror struck her.

“ THEN YOU ARE A MARRIED MAN! ” she cried, in sudden consternation, leaping to her feet. “ HOW DARE YOU——! ”

I winked at the Hempie, and shook my head. But she would not sit down.

“ I demand an explanation, ” she said, as fiercely as if she had been her own big brother.

I will admit there were elements of difficulty

in the situation. But nevertheless I was equal to the occasion.

"She can never bring me up for it, at any rate," I said boldly.

"How's that?" said the Hempie.

"Just because the three pensioners never heard a word we said. I kened from the first that they were a' as deaf as posts!"

"But if she takes ye up to the Court before her father, what will ye swear that ye said to the pensioners when ye were marrying her?"

"Oh," said I carelessly, "I'll just say that I was remarking that it was a bonny day and a fine view!"

A pebble from the Hempie's deft knuckle touched up the frog at this moment. He sprang into the air spasmodically and dropped plump into the well. It was his fate, and the pity was that he could not romance himself out of his difficulty so readily as I. For you see, he was only a frog and had never been a year at college.

CHAPTER XI.

THE SQUARING OF THE HEMPIE.

For reasons, therefore, which will now commend themselves to the meanest capacity, it would not do for me to quarrel with the Hempie. I knew well the penetrating nature of her detective researches. I had suffered under the lash of her tongue. And only those who have experienced it know how biting and merciless the truth can be when spoken by a wild, helter-skelter lass of fifteen.

The tale of the Lady Sophronia was only one of many, mostly of the same class of pure, healthful, untrammelled fiction, but with here and there such grains of truth in the mass as might prove exceedingly inconvenient—if (as was quite possible) the Hempie should “split,” and I be called upon to answer for my somewhat variegated past before the tribunal of my new sweetheart Nance.

There was, for instance, the improving tale of the Professor's daughter (my own favourite) who

was so enamoured with my charms as to supply me regularly with proofs before letters of her father's final examination papers—which, of course, I was too noble to take advantage of myself (that is, as soon as I saw the expression on the Hempie's face). But I went on to tell how I stayed away from the examination, and gave the benefit of the treasure-trove of affection to a poor lame boy, whose mother took in washing. He came out fifty-sixth, and called me a blamed fool the morning after. I had, it seemed, supplied him with drafts of old examination papers taken from a University calendar of ten years ago. This broke up the fair edifice of our mutual loves. How can affection exist without confidence? All was over between us from that moment. I told the Professor's daughter so when next I saw her, and she said, "Let me see, what *is* your name? I see so many funny boys that I declare I cannot tell one from the other."

The Hempie did not care much about this tale. She always liked me to win. But, for the sake of my own self-respect, I had to have a change sometimes. Then, in addition to these, there was the tale of the landlady's beautiful daughter, who, all unbeknowns, feather-stitched my under-garments in red silk, and brought in coals three times in the course of one evening.

We lived in paradise till her mother found it out and cracked her over the head with the coal-shovel. I recalled also the art-student whose easel I carried home every day from the gallery on the Mound, and whom I loved with a wild, mad love, till in an evil hour she asked me to go and see her pictures. Our love-tale stopped precisely at 4 P. M. on that day after I had looked at the third. There was also the fair unknown who stopped her carriage and pair at the park entrance, and asked me to drive with her round the Queen's Drive, afterwards pressing my hand tenderly, and asking me to dinner in Royal Terrace (Leith). Whereupon I promised faithfully, but went not, because I had pawned my dress suit. These and others of equal merit and veracity were within the Hempie's knowledge, and I had good reason to dread the remarkable accuracy of her memory.

Very decidedly I must "square" the Hempie. But ought I to take a tender farewell of her, according to the ancient and approved fashion, and tell her that I was "ready to be her friend?" No—after mature reflection, decidedly not. I could guess the Hempie's answer to that.

Besides, how with the best intentions, can you take a tender farewell of a young woman, who, at your approach, flies off tangentially over

pig-styes and orchards? I have tried it, and it simply cannot be done.

I thought the matter over long and carefully, devoting almost as much time and serious consideration to the problem as I did to that other of how best to please my sweetheart Nance. My excellent father did not, I fear, derive much benefit from my labours about this time. And had it not been for the sympathetic consideration of the farm-servants, male and female, about Drumquhat—who were all intimately acquainted with, and deeply interested in, the game “our young Alec” was playing, many a time my share of the work upon the farm of Drumquhat would have remained undone for ever. But somehow or other the cattle were foddered, horses were suppered, sheep were looked, harness was cleaned, and the necessary lies told—all as by some benignant Brownie. And thus in my absence my share of the work at Drumquhat was far more conscientiously done than in my stray blinks of fitful, absent-minded presence. For the Scottish serving-lad has many faults and failings, but there is no such second or confidant in a love campaign to be found anywhere the world over. He will cheerfully give his days and nights to cloak a comrade’s love-errand. He will abnegate himself most austerely, denying alike home pleasures and

public-houses. He will immolate himself readily and without a thought upon friendship's altar, tramping miles after a weary day's work in order to attract temporarily the attention of a suspicious mother or to occupy the yet more fatal loquacious, spoil-sport father. Thus it was that I could so successfully leave my work at Drumquhat, and haunt the precincts of Nether Neuk, as regularly and pertinaciously as if I had been one of Grace the Henwife's brown-speckled barn-door fowls.

But through all the matter of my quarrel with the Hempie continued to trouble me.

At last I had it—I would repent. This was a state of mind so unknown, and, therefore, so inconceivable to the Hempie, that I was certain it could not fail to impress her with respect, if not with esteem.

So, early one summer evening I leaped cautiously over the march-dyke from the Hill of Drumquhat, where, theoretically at least, I was engaged in "looking the sheep"—that is, numbering them and seeing that none had strayed, fallen into moss-holes, "gone visiting," or been troubled with "mawks." I had, however, on this occasion committed the entire flock wholesale to a kind Providence, and now I made my way down the dyke-side to the well of Nether Neuk, sitting

beside which I had in former times told so many wonderful tales to the Hempie.

Here I waited, with my legs hanging down over the kerb. But not in the old, self-sufficient, careless way. No; my nether limbs were disposed so as to express the abandonment of grief—wide at the knees, so that in time of need my elbows could rest upon them, while I was making up my mind whether life were worth living or not; then drawn close at the feet with a lax droop, heels out, toes turned in and touching each other. My broad blue bonnet had fallen aside. My face was buried in my hands. My whole body was shaken with sobs—that is, as soon as I heard the Hempie approaching. I knew without looking that it must be the Hempie, for Nance was with her father at the market of Cairn Edward, and Grace was busy, with the assistance of a chance swain, in turning the cheese upon the dairy shelves.

The Hempie came down the green loaning, singing, an empty can in one hand, the other set jauntily on her hip: "*With a tra-la-la, brave boys, with a tra-la-la-a!*"

At sight of me the Hempie's gallant burst of song tailed off into a long diminishing *la-a-a* exactly like the conclusion of a performance on the bagpipes, when the drones wail for a moment

querulously and exhaustedly as the piper unships the bag from under his arm, and, as it were, shakes the dregs of the tune out of them.

Even thus ignominiously sank the Hempie's song. Her water-can, raffishly a-dangle at her side, its handle clinking to the gay, marching music, dropped limp and silent. She lifted the brimless old hat (which was the Hempie's ordinary headgear, to show that she was not proud) from its impudent perch on the back of the head, and arranged it as demurely as possible low upon her brow, as if she had been nearing the kirk door.

She looked uncertainly at me, but, of course, I was all unaware of her presence. Sorrow, sad mistress, had uncontrolled possession of my soul. I was deaf to all the world beside.

The Hempie was definitely impressed, and I think she was on the point of speaking to me there and then—even asking what was the matter with me. But, like a blight, I felt rather than saw the fatal seed of distrust take root and grow up in her mind. The Hempie knew me of old. After all, I might only be "playing pretending."

"Humph!" snorted the Hempie, contemptuously, and stooped with her empty can over the well-mouth. All the time she was filling it, I could feel her eyes piercing through me. But I

had nothing to fear. Grief, though I say it myself, was never better expressed. Nevertheless, my character was such that the better I acted, the less I was believed. It was difficult to grow the flower of confidence upon a sub-soil of distrust, top-dressed with bitter experience. So, at least, thought the Hempie.

She paused, looked long at me, and finally decided that I was not to be trusted. I had told one tale too many.

“Humph!” she exploded again, more contemptuously than before. “Think you are mighty clever, Mister Alexander McQuhirr of Drumquhat, student!”

And with these words she lifted her can and marched haughtily away. Then, indeed, I felt the full bitter loneliness of my defeat, and, my imagination working handsomely, real tears rose in my eyes. I looked up at the Hempie as she passed. By another special dispensation, at that moment the Hempie was taking a last look at me. And the timeously providential tears smote her fair and square, and as it were knocked the unbelief out of her at one blow. She paused, aghast. The terror of the unknown paralysed her. My battle was won, if I could only hold on for a minute, and the tears behaved themselves. Yet such are the evil fates, that I felt as much in-

clined to laugh, as I had once done in church when a psalm-book fell from the gallery upon the bald head of our leading elder. But on this much graver occasion I held on manfully—choking down the mirth successfully—drowning it, so to speak, in the bitter waters of sorrow.

Had I, upon her approach, put out my tongue, jeered at her, defied her, even thrown a stone at her, the Hempie would have returned me the answer in kind, with usury thereto—aye, and been glad of the chance.

But grief and tears were, in mankind at least, unknown to the Hempie. Her nerves were shaken.

Suddenly something leaped with a splash within the can of water in her hand.

“Oh!” she cried, and let the can drop bodily. It spilled its contents out upon the grass, including the frog, and then slowly rolled down the brae. I sank my head again into my hands, and my whole frame was shaken. It was miles better than the hymn-book. Yet I commanded myself, for I was risking all, and that on the very lip of success.

The Hempie came back, bowed herself down to get a glimpse of my face, then put her hands on my shoulders; but not in the way of love.

She shook me roughly, untenderly, almost indignantly.

"What in the world's the maitter, Alec?" she cried. "Stop it, dy'e hear me!"

Even so had she heard Grace the stolid, staying the occasional hysterics of her more highly-strung sister Nance.

I made no answer in words. A stiller and yet more impressive melancholy took possession of me. I managed to control myself in this alien-presence; but it was manifestly only by a powerful effort of will, and, as it were, for the time being. I smiled waterily; then I looked hard at the can as if I hoped she would soon go away and leave me alone.

"Alec!" The Hempie returned to the attack, "stop it—I'll gang and bring my faither to ye if ye dinna stop!"

This she said, knowing well that not for two hours would Peter Chrystie's face be seen at Nether Neuk, and then only transitorily, *en route* to his bed.

Still I remained obdurate. Upon which, quick as a glass breaking, the Hempie dropped coercion and assumed the weapons more proper to her sex.

"Speak to me, Alec," she said, almost pleadingly. "You will speak to *me*?"

I looked at her slowly, fixedly, and then as slowly shook my head.

“What is it? Oh, Alec, tell me!”

“Good-bye, Hempie,” I said hoarsely, and with difficulty, “I ken I have not treated ye weel. But ye’ll maybe forgi’e me—*after*, ye ken—when—when they bring you the news!”

“Oh, Alec, what for do ye speak like that? What news? Ye are no gaun to do onything rash?”

Again I shook my head, slowly and mournfully.

“What else can I do?” I said, with a sigh which seemed to come from the bottom of the well, so deep it was, so soaked and water-logged with misery.

“But tell me—tell your Hempie!” This coaxingly, so that I felt a very brute—as I was. “Can nocht be done?”

Again I shook my head.

“Is it—is it Nance?”

It cost the Hempie all her pride to articulate the query. She did it like taking medicine.

I was silent, looking gravely at the frog as he hopped away, a sadder and wiser amphibian.

“My certes!” she exclaimed, suddenly kindling, “if that besome plays at *jookery-packery* wi’

you as she did wi' the rest, I'll—I'll tell my faither on her."

This was excellent, and I proceeded to drive in the nails.

"Hempie," I said solemnly, "if I reveal a secret, ye will promise me no to tell?"

The Hempie promised, alert with excitement, and sat down on the other side of the well, with expectation shining on her face. She took one foot in the opposite hand, crossing the ankle over her knee, according to a pretty boyish habit she had—a relic of her short-skirt days not yet long gone by.

"The Lady Sophronia——" I began impressively.

"What? She has had the law on ye, I'll wager!" cried the Hempie, all on fire in a moment. "And her faither, the Earl o' Sessions, is to be the judge. Alexander McQuhirr you are clean done for if he is."

"No, Hempie," I answered gravely and mournfully: "the Lady Sophronia—is dead!"

"*Dead!—dead!*" whispered the Hempie, so shocked that even I (shameless wretch!) was a little ashamed. "The Honourable Sophronia—dead! Then she canna law-plea ye! What for are ye vexed then?"

The Hempie stated a principle quite just in

law. The Lady Sophronia could not pursue for bed and board after she was dead, even if her father *was* an Earl of Session and lived above the Parliament House in the city of Edinburgh.

I leaned forward and touched the Hempie on the arm.

“Do you no see?” said I, with mystery in my face.

“No, I dinna!” she admitted candidly, trying her best all the same.

“I AM A WIDOWER!” I said, and paused.

“Weel,” said the Hempie encouragingly, “they canna jail ye for that!”

I commanded myself and went on.

“No, Hempie,” I said, “that is true. But you do no see that, being a widower, I’ll hae to wear black.”

“And what o’ that,” said the Hempie; “what need ye put an end to yoursel’ for that? The minister wears black every day o’ the week—and gets fatter on it a’ the time!”

“But you forget, Hempie, that if I wear black, Nance will ken what it is for—and *ye ken she has sworn never to mairry a widower!*”

“I ken that,” said the Hempie, finger on lip, considering. Then she reached over to me and whispered impressively, “But there is no need to wear the crape on your coat. Wear a black band

on the sleeve o' your sark. Or mark it wi' ink on your arm below the oxter—it will easy wash off. I ha'e striped my legs in rings mony a time frae tap to bottom."

I leaped to my feet, and clasped the Hempie gratefully by the hand.

"Hempie," cried I, "ye are a great genius!"

"Oh—no very!" she made reply, waving her hand with the air of modest merit.

But all the same I could see that she was not ill-pleased.

"And as for Nance," she said, "gie yoursel' no trouble about her. I'll look after Nance. And I'll tell ye what, when ye are away in Edinburgh, I'll see that she doesna' carry on wi' the rest o' the lads ahint your back."

The Hempie nodded, as if this was by no means a work of supererogation which she had undertaken.

"I'll keep my eye on Mistress Nance, never fear!" she repeated.

Then she looked up at me with sudden suspicion. "But you will no be making love to ony mair professors' daughters—nor drawing-board students?"

Again my record was against me.

"No, Hempie," I replied, hurt at the bare

suggestion; "how could I—ye forget; I'll be in mourning!"

"Oh, of course; I forgot that!" said the Hempie, entirely satisfied.

It was in this fashion, surely an original one, that I made it up with the Hempie. Could any man have done it better?

CHAPTER XII.

THE WATER-OF-DEE PEARLS.

But the Hempie's father—and Nance's, was quite another field to plough and harrow. Nance and I talked over our engagement—not by the well where I used to meet the Hempie. That was too open and unconcealed for Nance, who knew that stray suitors with jealous eyes were always wandering about Nether Neuk. So we met under the pear-tree in the orchard, because at that spot the shade was deepest, and there was the knowingest crooked seat (for one) in the crotch where the broad lowest bough pushed itself out at right angles to the gnarled trunk.

Here Nance and I met one dear June twilight.

We were quite safe, for Peter Chrystie was away spending the evening with the Laird of Butterhole (“Bargaining about me, so mind you behave,” said Nance archly). Furthermore, I had so arranged matters with the Hempie that

we were in no fear of that athletic young lady descending upon our heads on her way westward from the pig-styes.

I had brought my sweetheart a ring which I had contrived, as I thought, with much skill, and the making of which had imperilled my whole financial position. It was a plain gold gypsy ring, set with misty Water-of-Dee pearls, each one of which I had fished for myself out of the black pools and rushing rapids of that turbulent river.

It had just arrived that day from the little working jeweller in Edinburgh, who had lodged on the same flat as myself, and divided the cost of taking in the Spectator with me.

At first Nance was delighted—but in another moment she said, “ But pearls mean tears, Alec! ”

Now, nine times out of ten it is not the least use arguing with a woman about her superstitions. It is better to go off on a side issue, a personal one if possible, and so take her position in flank.

“ But, Nance,” said I, “ do you know that you look prettiest when you cry—or perhaps, to be exact, just when you are going to stop.” For by this time I had had one or two opportunities of knowing. And no true love-affair can go on long without such.

Nance smiled, and looked affectionately at her ring.

"Well, but—" she said, "I don't like tears between us two—at least, not often, and not unless *I* want to."

I tried the other flank.

"It is all right," I said confidently. "You see, these are not common imported sea-pearls—they come out of our own water of Dee. And, what is more, I waded for every one myself, and paid the tears for them on the spot, when the edges of the shells cut my feet."

Nance looked at the ring, with her head first on one side and then on the other.

"Of course I could not wear it," she murmured wistfully, after deep consideration.

"But why not?" I said; though I knew.

"My father——!" she began.

"Tut, Nance," I replied, "you are not often within sight of your father."

"No," she answered slowly, "it is not exactly that. But if I wore it, he would soon hear. You see, they talk a good deal about me in this parish. At least, the lads do."

"And the lasses are jealous—and they speak too?" I queried.

Nance sighed and raised her eyes demurely.

"I am sure I cannot tell a bit why they should

be jealous of me," she said; "but after all, I could wear it on a chain round my neck, couldn't I—that is, if I had a chain."

"You shall have one, Nance," I cried recklessly. (No dinner for two months, even getting it cost price from my little jeweller!)

"Oh, will I?" said Nance, clasping her hands ecstatically. Then she informed me solemnly that I, Alec McQuhirr, was most certainly a sweet thing and—— But why continue?

So it was arranged that my lass should wear her engagement ring round her neck—a decision which seemed somehow to relieve her mightily.

"You had better keep it for me till you get the chain," said Nance suddenly, as if she had remembered something all at once. "I have no pocket in this dress."

Now, this is a thing eternally incomprehensible to a man, who, whether he is rigged out in Whinnyliggate by Tailor Byron or has his clothes made in George Street, has but one idea of a comfortable coat—that is, a panoply of pockets, with just as much foundational fabric as will serve to connect them together. But I repeat the statement as Nance made it to me, and from what followed immediately, I have every reason to believe in its truth.

I slipped off my tie. It was a thin strip of

fine silk of a light blue. I knotted the ring into it, tied the ends in a bow, and gave it back to Nance.

“Wear that under your dress, sweetheart!” said I. “It would not be lucky to take back our engagement ring.”

Very daintily and carefully Nance set the ribbon of blue about her neck. I saw her fingers tremble as she undid the top button of her bodice to slip in the ring, blushing and looking down at the ground most bewitchingly as she did it.

But as she gave her head a little shake to settle the ribbon lower on her neck, it so chanced that I caught the thin gleam of a golden chain.

“Why, Nance, you have a gold chain on—and you never told me. Why did you not put the ring on that?”

Instantly my jealousy was aroused. The manifold hints of the Hempie as to Nance’s trustworthiness had fallen into all too fruitful soil.

“Nance,” I said sternly, “I insist upon seeing what is on that chain which you wear about your neck.”

My only excuse is that at the time I was very young, and did not know enough to take whatever the gods might send without asking questions. I have learned my lesson now.

Had I possessed the generosity of a Jew ped-

lar or the observation of a stable lout, I might have seen that my little sweetheart was suffering most piteously, and that, had I gone about it in the right way, she would have denied me nothing.

“Insist is not a word any one has ever used to Nance Chrystie,” she said, very quietly, but all the same looking at me with a new light in her eyes, quite different from that which I had seen there the night when I angered her by coming in at the French window.

“But I do insist!” I repeated, for I had become perfectly insane in my headstrong folly; “and, what is more, I have every right to know.”

“Then you shall know!”

She flashed her hand into her bosom and brought out a chain with not less than a bundle of trinkets hung upon it. There were five or six rings, three locketts, two halves of sixpences, and one whole crooked one.

Nance had undone the clasp of the gold chain like lightning, and gave me the whole into my hand. We were both standing up now by the pear-tree. I could see that she was very white and red, and hear that she was breathing very quickly, with her lips a little parted.

“There they are,” she said. “Now, Alec, what do you make of them when you have them?”

“That depends,” said I, mighty grave, “on what you call them, Nance.”

“I call them my property!” she said defiantly, flashing one look at me.

“Who gave them to you?” I said, looking down at them.

She stirred them a little contemptuously with her fore-finger, as if the pile of trinketry had been a nasty medicine which she wished to melt thoroughly before taking.

“I forget,” she said, lightly tossing her head. “There are too many of them to remember.”

“And pray, Mistress Nance,” I said, “how long will it be before my love-token takes its place among the others, and you ‘forget’ about Alec McQuhirr?”

“That depends upon yourself. Perhaps you would like to take your ring back now?”

“We will see about that later!” I said. “This now” (I went on, thinking, poor fool, I was doing bravely)—“who might be the giver of this very pretty thing?”

I touched with my finger a ring of quaint and ancient device, which was obviously of more value than the others.

“It was my Cousin Willie who left that behind him, to remember him by when he went to India.”

“Aha!” said I. “And this: was that another of your—cousins’?”

“It was,” answered Nance; “it must have been either Edgar or Joe—let me see!”

And she paused, with her finger deep in an excruciating dimple on her left cheek, knitting her brows the while, as if the problem were altogether too hard for her.

“And this locket; may I open it? . . . Yes. This tells its own tale. Who is this young man?”

“He is the elder brother of the Lady Sophronia!” replied the minx, and thrilled with wicked laughter.

Something very real took me high in the throat. I was tricked—deceived. Even the Hemptie—and I did think I could trust the Hemptie! But after all, no matter.

I crushed the chain and its appendages in my hand and flung them from me fiercely, far over the orchard wall into the grass of the meadow.

“There!” I cried, “I have done with you, Nance Chrystie. I decline to be one among a dozen—cousins or other. I need a heart to mate with mine, a heart that will be true as mine is true, single as mine is single!”

I thought this was rather fine; but Nance spoilt it.

"Oh!" she cried lightly, "it is not the single hearts that I object to, but the widowed ones."

I was too angry to take any notice of her taunting words.

"I have the honour to bid you good-bye!" I said grandly.

I wished afterwards I had had the courage to say "farewell" instead, but I knew Nance would laugh.

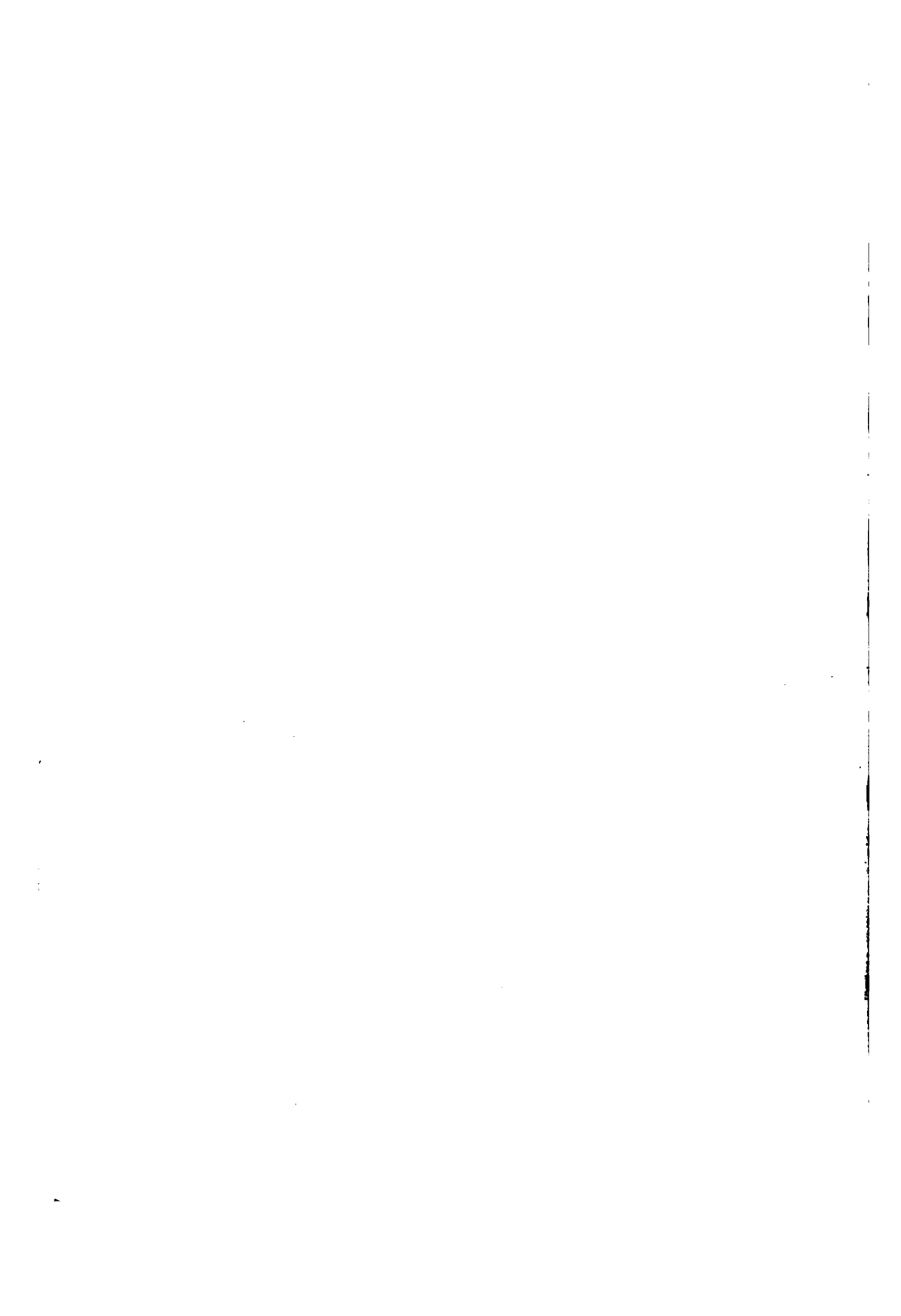
"Pray, Sir Singleheart, do not go without your property!" mocked the pretty vixen. And she made me a low curtsy and handed me back my ribbon and ring.

"You will find it, like your widowed heart, not so very much the worse for my brief wearing of it!"

She turned and tripped away, leaving me standing, gazing like a pitiful ninny at the ribbon in my hand. Then I took both the ring and the silken tie and threw them after the others, as far as I could into the meadow.



"You will find it, like your widowed heart, not much the worse for my wearing of it."



CHAPTER XIII.

MY OTHER SWEETHEART.

How I reached Drumquhat I do not know. I only remember that I found myself, somehow, in the stable suppering the horses, side by side with Gib M'Whulter, our serving-man. He looked up in astonishment at my early return.

"What's wrang, laddie, that ye hae through wi' your courtin' already?"

My heart was too full, my wounds too recent, for me to answer. I went sullenly on with my work.

"Aweel," said Gib philosophically, "since ye are here, e'en gie the horse graith a bit polish, and I'll gang ower by and tak' a turn at the hizzies mysel'!"

A sort of dazed numbness took hold of me. It was as though my head had been cut through at the neck with an exceedingly sharp knife, and I would not find it out till I sneezed.

Yet this very lack of ordinary feeling enabled

me in some fashion to get through the evening. I went into the kitchen and got a book to read. Then I sat down with my back to the light—more to escape the eyes of my mother (which seemed to fill the house, and reach some way across the yard) than to get the light upon the page. Indeed, I never even found out what it was that I was reading. For all the while my heart throbbed out, “Nance! Nance!” And mocking little fiends ran up and down the lines of print, skipping from one to the other and crying, “You are a fool, Alec M’Quhirr! You are a great fool, Alec M’Quhirr!”

And in my deepest heart-deeps, I knew that I was—the greatest and most foolish of fools.

Then came the almost unendurable interlude of the “Buik,” when the reverend voice of my father, as he read the Gospels, and sent sonorously up the evening sacrifice of family petition, seemed to me a thousand miles away—like a voice speaking unintelligible words far out on the confines of space. Immediately after we had risen from our knees, I escaped to the little gable room over the peat-shed in which I slept.

My mother came up to bid me good-night, and watched me like a cat at a mouse-hole while I answered “Yes” and “No” at random to her questions and gossip. She spoke of the new tune

the precentor had sung to the hundred-and-third psalm on Sabbath morning at the Kirk on the Hill. She was more than doubtful whether there was any scriptural warrant for wantonly repeating the last line. She spoke of my father's thoughtlessness in the matter of putting on clean socks.

Suddenly I grew conscious that her eyes had become fixed in her head. She was gazing directly at my neck.

"What's come o' the blue silk tie that ye gaed oot wi' the nicht, Alec?" she cried.

I had the lie ready. It crouched immediately behind my teeth; but I tell you what—I could not speak it to my mother. So I was silent.

"Did ye loss it, Alec?" she said, bending her face a little nearer to look. It was nearly out that time. And it would have been a good lie—a serviceable lie. But just then I caught sight of the webbed and netted crows'-feet about my mother's eyes, and the lie went back to its own place like a Jack-in-the-box. The lid was shut upon it with a clang, too.

"Did ye loss it, Alec?" my mother repeated more gently.

("O Lord, if only she would be angry, and rage at me!")

"No," said I, "I didna loss it, mither!"

I suppose I spoke sullenly, in that native Scots which can sound so dour and hard. But my heart within me was not sullen. Whenever my mother spoke to me like that, I became at once about six years of my age. And there is nothing that twenty-one resents more.

"Did ye gie it away?"

There was silence in the garret. I lost sight of the crows'-feet. I saw instead that my mother's eyes were of a faded and cloudy blue, and her heart seemed so close under them that I actually saw them ache.

"Aye," I said slowly, the words driven out of me, "I gied it awa', mither!"

"To Nance Chrystie?"

"Aye!"

My mother's underlip began to "wicker," as we used to say at school—the sort of trembling that you cannot stop when you will.

O, if she would only strike me. What a pitiless thing a mother is! I wanted to cry out and stamp. If I had not been brought up a Cameronian I would have sworn at my mother, and had to answer for it on the Judgment Day.

As it was, I only nodded.

There was a full century's silence in the garret over the peat-shed. My mother held the Drum-

fern Standard, her favourite paper for deaths and marriages, folded broadly in her hand. I heard something go *pat-pat* on it. I knew it was not raining. But I wished that it had thundered and that the bolt had stricken me.

“Oh, mither, what for do ye do that?” I cried at length. For I was on my knees beside her, trying to take her thin fingers.

But she held me off with one hand, while she tried to dry her eyes with her apron and the Drumfern Standard clutched together in the other.

“Oh, it’s richt, it’s richt! It’s as the guidman says. It comes to every mither. But her first-born son! It has come a wee sudden on me, Alec. That’s a’! Ye micht hae let me be the first wi’ ye a while langer!”

“Mither, mither,” I said, “ye shall aye be first wi’ me, as lang as I live!”

She shook her head slowly, sadly. And if there was a weary world-wisdom in her smile, there was the wisdom of heaven in her eyes—yet not the wisdom of the angels who had neither sinned or suffered.

“And she put it about her neck?” said my mother, more like one calling up old memories out of the vasty deep and meditating upon them, than like one who asks a question.

I said nothing—for how could I tell her the truth.

“ Well,” said my mother, at last, “ she’s bonny eneuch to look upon. Oh, I’ll never deny that she is fell bonny!”

Nance Chrystie never in her life had such a compliment paid to her beauty as those dozen reluctant words of my mother’s, forced from her trembling lips by a sense of justice, stern as the moral law itself.

“ And what did she gie you, Alec? Will ye let me see it? ”

She spoke almost pitifully, like one who asks a favour almost too great to be thought upon.

“ Naething! ”

“ Alec, dinna lee to your mither! ”

Again the years passed on through the garret, in a remorseless, ticking silence—the ticking of my own heart and my mother’s running races. The two of them seemed to fill the room.

“ There was a ring on the riband, mither! ”
I said at last.

“ A ring. Laddie, where gat ye a ring? Ye didna buy it wi’ your college siller? ”

“ It was juist yon Water-o’-Dee pearls that a freend o’ mine set for me! ”

“ The Water-o’-Dee pearls, Alec! Laddie, ye telled me that ye were keeping them for me—to

gie them to your mither the day ye were capped in Edinburgh."

"Did I, mither? Did I say that? I wasna minding that I had said that! But I'll get ye far brawer and better anes!"

My mother rocked herself to and fro, as she had often done when her bairns were children. The motion had become habitual to her when she was in trouble. Then she checked herself, and sat straight up, lest I should think she was fretting.

"I dinna want your pearls, laddie. What would the like o' me do wi' pearls? It is better as it is. They'll set bonnie young Nance Chrystie far better than an auld done body like me. Oh, I ken that."

"Mither! Mither!"

"Haud awa'—dinna touch me the noo. I'm no greetin', I tell ye. I didna want the bit pearls. It was juist—juist that ye should hae thocht yince o' gettin' them for me, and that ye cutted your feet bringing them oot o' the water!"

If the condemned criminal suffers as I did then, I am in favour of instant execution, five minutes after sentence.

No, I was not crying. How should a man of almost one-and-twenty cry like a bairn?

Then, when my mother spoke again, it was in

a changed tone—like one ashamed, and yet more than half curious.

“And what did she say when ye gied the ring to her?”

“She gied it back to me again!”

“Oh, the limmer—how dared she!” cried my mother, on fire instantly at the hint of an insult or rejection to her eldest son.

“It was my fault, mither—I quarrelled her. I angered her. I taunted her till she did it.”

“What angered ye, laddie?—what did she do to ye?”

But I was not telling tales on Nance that journey—not even to my mother.

“Oh, nothing,” I said; “it was only my own ill-nature—my de’il’s temper.”

“Were ye tauntin’ her about haein’ had ither lads?” said my mother.

“How do ye ken that, mither?” I cried, astonished in my turn.

She laughed a little—a laugh I had never heard before. It seemed a young laugh—the laugh a lass laughs to a lad she likes well when they two are all alone.

“Ah!—thirty years! . . . thirty years! . . .” said my mother.

And there was a sweet, sad light of memory in the misty eyes of blue.

"Oh, mither," I said (I was on my knees beside her: how I came there I do not know), "ye are winsome yet, mither. Ye maun hae been bonny in your day." Then, with sudden contrition, "Ye are bonny and winsome noo!"

My hand was between her two, and she patted the back of it gently with the uppermost.

"Alexander, lad," she said, still in the young voice, "I mind a lad and a lass that were fond o' yin anither, like Nance and you. And he quarrelled her, and he was prood, and she was prooder. And he gaed awa'—thirty years since. . . . thirty year!"

"Was't my faither?" I asked.

"Na," said my mother, drawing in her breath quickly, "na—no near sae guid a man as your faither. But the lass was fond o' him—aye: he was her first, ye see. And he gaed awa'! She never saw him mair!"

I waited for the rest. But there was no more.

The wrinkled hand, hardened with work, but soft as silk when the touch of love was in it, went on gently patting mine.

And I stroked my mother's hair as if she had been my sweetheart. She never let me do that before. I declare I felt her lean her head against my hand as I stroked, just as Nance did.

"Gang back—gang back to her this verra

nicht, Alec!" she cried earnestly. "Dinna ever be prood wi' the one ye love. She will no be prood wi' you, gin she lo'es you. I'll wager she is greetin'—greetin' sair—the noo!"

"She was laughin' when she gaed awa'!" I said; for my pride was not all gone.

"I ken—I ken," said my mother. "That lass, the lass that I was speakin' aboot, lauched too as she gaed oot o' his sicht. But she wat her pillow through and through that nicht, before ever she saw the licht o' the dawning—and the boat that carried him awa' half across the blue Solway."

She listened a little, with her ear toward the door.

"Put on your coat and awa' wi' ye. I'll let ye in when ye come back. Find the ring and the ribband, and tak' them direct to the lass. She will be fell fond to get them back, I can assure ye. And say first that ye are vexed for what ye said and did—tell her that. She'll no' be sleepin', and will rise wi' a licht heart to speak doon to ye frae her window-sole."

I hesitated still, for a single moment. It was not my nature easily to give in.

"She will be lyin' listenin' for your step comin' up the loanin', Alec!"

My mother's voice pled like that of a young

lass fleeching with her sullen lover when he is in the wrong. She might have been the lass herself.

My heart was melting fast. There was no more anger in it anywhere.

“The lass that I was speakin’ about, listened lang. But she never heard the step she lo’ed better than her ain soul. She prayed, but nae answer cam’ but the cryin’ o’ the wild birds oot on the lonely muir. Oh, Alec lad, it’s an awfu’ thing to be prood with them ye love!”

My mother helped me on with my coat, and, motioning me to walk behind her, she let me softly out. And on the doorstep she stooped quickly and kissed me, almost as she had been my sweetheart. Then the door shut to, all but a crack, and I knew that my mother’s ear was at that crack.

There was a sudden feeling of intense cold in the air. It was my face drying in the night wind. It was not dark, for at that time of the year the days are very long and the skies very clear. I ran rather than walked towards the farm-steading of Nether Neuk. I could easily have gone blind-fold, I knew the way so well.

I reached the orchard wall. It was but a low stone dyke, but the gloom was dense among the trees. As I came near, something soft and white

—a great owl most like—flitted across and was lost in the shadow. I skirted the dyke, keeping wide from the office houses, till I came opposite to our pear-tree. Here or hereabouts in the meadow must be the place. I stooped to my search. My foot struck something that jingled. It was the chain which had been about Nance's neck. The trinkets were still upon it.

Then the anger came on me again, and almost I had thrown it from me once more, like a poisonous asp which had power to sting me. But my mother's last words came to me: "Be not proud with those you love."

So I stood with the trinketry in my hand, and my better soul came again to me like the forgiveness of a child. My mother was certainly praying for me at that moment.

"After all," I said to myself, "what business is it of mine? I know she is sweet and pure and—loves me. Of course, men have loved her—tried their best to win her. And what matters it if she has taken their gifts as she has taken the gifts of the summer air, the summer flowers? Right certainly she loves me as she never loved before. I will go and tell her that I am sorry. I will take back the ring to her!"

I stooped and began to look for the blue ribband and the ring. I searched everywhere,

and in the clear, lingering light of the west I could distinguish every blade of grass.

The blue ribband and the pearl ring were not there!

But as I skirted the dyke-side I found a small shoe, and a flat stone had fallen from the wall and lay partly upon the top of it. It was—well, I knew Nance Chrystie's shoe. But then again: when Nance went indoors from the pear-tree she had gone through, not outside the orchard.

Then she must have been here again. She must have come back—of her own accord she must have returned to the orchard. . . . What was the white flitting owl which I saw as I came?

I looked over the dyke. There was the pear-tree—and—yes, something white was settled low in the crotch where we two had sat.

I was over the dyke in a moment, and Nance—Nance nestled in to me with a little frightened cry.

“Oh, I was afraid,” she whispered, “so dreadfully afraid. I did not know it was you, Alec! And I dropped my shoe.”

I had her by the hand. There was a ring on her finger—my ring. I felt the Water-of-Dee pearls.

She read my thoughts.

“Alec,” she said, “dear lad, I am sorry I was

cross. I shall always wear your ring there now. I do not care who knows—so long as you love me!”

We kissed one another.

“And now, dearest, do you want this?” I said, holding up the gold chain with the trinkets.

“Yes,” replied Nance, “I want it very much!”

But before I had time to sulk (I felt it coming on), she added—

“You see, they were all my mother’s—I wear them for her sake!”

“NANCE!” I cried aloud, in wild astonishment and reproach.

She nodded archly and a little defiantly.

“Yes, every one of them!”

“And why did you not tell me at first?”

“Well,” she said, picking at the ring on her finger, “because at first you did not ask me prettily. You were horrid—you know you were!”

I knew, and said so willingly, humbly.

There is no more to tell at this time. We walked home—after a while—hand in hand. And ere the French window shut Nance Chrystie from my sight—I knew what I knew.

My mother met me at the door. How she heard me come I know not.

“Well?” she said.

“It is all right!” I whispered.

My mother put her hand on my head. She must have stood on tiptoe to do it, for she was a little woman. She did not kiss me this time.

“The God of Jacob bless Nance and you!” was all she said.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE ARGUMENT OF NABAL THE CHURL.

One day I had been on the hills among the sheep all the morning, with my active and corporeal frame busy with their oversight and subdivision, but all my soul and three-fourths of my attention centred upon the green bosky orchards and white steadings of the farm of Nether Neuk, lying so snugly in the valley beneath.

The Chrystie's farm was a far larger and more important one than ours. For Peter was a very wealthy man, as farmers went in our part of the country. His daughters, indeed, took their part in indoor work as a matter of course, and were the better for it, too. But Peter was understood to be only waiting for the decease of his scape-grace laird (whom two generations of the parish of Whinnyliggate had known as the Prodigal), in order to set up as proprietor of Nether Neuk himself. But the Prodigal of Whinnyliggate, like

another of the race, was an unconscionable time a-dying.

“Prodigal here—Prodigal there!” exclaimed my mother, “a’ I ken is that the craitur comes twice a year and scrapes a’ the siller he can thegither—then awa’ again to spend it on high livin’ and limmers. But no a sign o’ ony repentance. Prodigal indeed! Faith, ye may weel say it!”

It was popularly supposed that this unstable prop of the landed interest was very much on Peter Chrystie’s hands financially, and that, practically speaking, the fair fields of Nether Neuk (and it might be a farm or two further up Loch Granoch) were as good as Peter’s own, whenever he liked to claim them. It is small wonder then, that I had no extraordinary favour to expect in my projects matrimonial from Peter Chrystie. But grace or no grace, it was a fine Galloway morning. I was twenty-one and in love.

And these, to one who knows, say much. For the heather hills of the ancient province combine the rich colour of the South with the caller air and large horizons of the North. And as for being in love—why, when I went out in the dawn, the very heather-bells, swishing wet about my feet as I breasted the brae, seemed to cry out, “Nance! Nance!” in rhythmic response to the beating of my heart.

Then it was that, for the first time, I saw the beauty of Nature as it had been when God made it and Love together—or, perhaps, rather as it appeared when Adam awoke, and his first upward glance met the eyes of the Woman looking down into his.

The sun was still climbing the clean-washed sky of morning. The larks, earliest choristers of the moorland, were pulsating upwards. "Nance! Nance!" they sang. From the drying heather came the crickets' shrill chirr of content, sharp as a scythe that is whetted on the mower's strake. "Nance! Nance!" they answered one another. And the green-coated peewits called her name. The whaups whistled on her like so many sweet-hearts calling her to come. Away across the pastures the plaintive recitative of the lambs lately separated from their mothers, told the tale of how lonely it is to live without the Only One—the beloved of the heart.

Meanwhile, I was working my collies for all they were worth—more with arm than with voice, however—not like my father, who, when he is among the sheep, will send his stormy vociferations bellowing from hill-top to hill-top, till they break in a clap of thunder upon the careless or disobedient dogs as they go scouring hither and thither.

This morning my father was working on the peat-moss within full sight, and for that reason, as well as because it was far too early in the day to give me any opportunity of seeing Nance, I was doing my duty among the woolly backs with infinitely more care and attention than usual.

But even as the dogs, with discursive barkings and crested tails were "wearing" the sheep from the side pastures towards the "slap" (or narrow opening bitten out of the high stone dyke), I was watching the square quadrangle of the Nether Neuk buildings for a gleam of rose-colour.

On they came, each meek, jetty nose laid companionably on the back of its comrade in front. I was counting by scores—even as to this day I count everything from pills to postage-stamps, by scores and by the eye, because I learned the business first among the thronging "black-faces" as they passed through the "buchs" and "slaps" of the Galloway hills.

The plaintive shouldering press crowded slowly through the narrow pass, and the sheep, issuing out of the needle's eye through which they had been strained, counted, and medically examined all in one passing glance, opened out and scattered with modulated bleatings along the many worn sheep-tracks which went meandering over the hill of Drumquhat.

The last laggard had gone by, limping on three legs. The active leaders were already far up the rugged face of the "Gairy" or overhanging brows of heathery fell, when, with a long sigh of relief, I was able at last to turn, set my elbows on the march-dyke and satisfy my eyes with a long, hungry look at the beloved house of Nether Neuk. And as I gazed, the very glare of the sunshine upon the whitewash of its walls seemed strangely enough to pulsate "Nance! Nance!" even as did my heart, my footsteps, and indeed everything else in the world that day.

Suddenly my heart leaped to a new tune. There came a gleam of rose—a girlish figure was seen at the barn end, the flash of arms bare in the sunshine, a light sunbonnet, a summer dress pink like apple blossom.

Careless of my father on the peat-moss I sprang to the top of the dyke and waved my bonnet distractedly on the top of my shepherd's crook.

The figure stopped to look, hand held level with the brows, all clearly outlined against the shadowy orchard trees. There was an answering wave of the hand. My blood leaped for joy in my veins. Ah, the heart of a lover! How true are its instincts! It never makes mistakes.

Then arose from behind me the slow drawl of the voice pertaining to "Rab An'erson, Lazy Taed!" There was also a sharp whiff of black tobacco in the air. He turned his sleepy eyes up at me, as I stood waving upon the wall, then he took his pipe from his mouth and blew a long thin cloud very slowly.

"That's Meg Coupland, the Nether Neuk byre lass. She *will* be pleased!"

I dropped from the top of the dyke as if I had been shot.

"I declare, Rab Anderson, I'll break every bone in your shapeless hulk of a body"—I was beginning belligerently—for indeed it was enough to anger the most long suffering—when, soughing up out of the hollow valley beneath there came upon the light wind a voice, thin, shrill, wire-drawn, the voice of the farmer of Nether Neuk.

"Saw ye ocht o' Rab An'erson, Lazy Taed! Saw ye ocht o' Rab An'erson, Lazy Taed!"

Now, as a farmer and a prospective land-owner, still more as a father, I had every sort of respect for Peter Chrystie. But I had no desire to put myself in his way that morning. Strangely enough, no more had Master Robert Anderson, herd, loafer, poacher, unprofitable servant. So with truly remarkable unanimity of sentiment the

two of us dropped side by side into the first convenient moss-hag on the moor-side, and lay there, safely ensconced each behind his own tussock of bent and heather. We were not afraid; we did not run; *but*, we had business out there which must be attended to.

Presently we heard Peter Chrystie come hirp-ling and muttering to himself along the Nether Neuk side of the march-dyke.

“I could ha’e swore that I saw that ill-contrived blastie, Alec McWhurr, jumpin’ up and doon on my march-dyke like a whitterick in a rickle o’ stanes. Juist let me get my tongue on him.”

We could hear Peter blowing and gurgling as he climbed up the dyke—swearing most profanely when his foot slipped and he scraped his leg from knee to shin upon the sharp stones.

Presently, from behind me I heard another foot, steady, slow, weighty, come striding over the heather. I knew the step for that of my father, Saunders McQuhrr.

I could not see him from my lair of ignominy, but I knew well enough how fine he would look. Six feet high and straight at sixty-five as at twenty stood Saunders of Drumquhat. Sunday and Saturday he was clad in a blue frieze coat with broad buttons. Knee breeches of corduroy,

and shoon buckled with worn silver clasps completed his attire. His broad bonnet of dark Kilmarnock blue was carried in his hand as was his custom, save when it rained. His grey hair strayed in locks over his massive brow—small wonder that my mother and all his sons were proud of him. There was no such man of his years in six parishes.

I heard him pass to the right of us and go towards the march-dyke.

“The height of the morning to you, Drumquhat!” Peter Chrystie’s shrill falsetto began, querulously.

Very cautiously I peeped past the edge of the heather bush above me. There within twenty yards was Peter, small, wizened, “boolie-backed,” * sitting cross-legged on the top of the wall, for all the world like a puggie-monkey on a street organ.

My father stood beneath looking as I have told you. Whenever I heard in church of man being made a little lower than the angels I always thought of my father.

And whenever I have looked at Peter Chrystie, I have all my life been at a loss to account

* Bent-backed, *i.e.*, with the back of a “boolie” or small wicker basket.

for his daughter Nance. Her mother surely must have been indeed a paragon of womanhood.

"I was saying' that it was a fine day, Drum-quhat!" said Peter again a little more sharply.

"God made the day—it is not our part to find fault!" said my father, the Cameronian elder, who above all things disliked commonplaces about the weather, and was therefore almost shut out of ordinary society.

"Did ye come ower this road to look the sheep?" asked Peter from the top of the dyke, ignoring any questions doubtfully theological.

"I came to look for my son Alexander," answered Saunders McQuhirr very succinctly.

"He's a fine lad—him!" said Peter, with sneering emphasis.

"He *is* a fine lad enough," said my father sternly, "and that is more than I would say in his presence."

"Very like," snarled Peter; "then ye might keep your fine lads a little nearer home, Drum-quhat! It would not harm the fine lads."

"If you and yours get no greater harm in this world than my lads will do them, you and they will have some reason for thankfulness," said my father firmly.

Saunders McQuhirr was a bigger man in every way than his son. Even at twenty he would

not have taken to a moss-hag and a heather bush, even though (as one Martin Luther said) it had rained Peter Chrysties for nine days!

“He will never get my lassie, hear ye that!” cried Peter, angrily. “He is but a pauper at ony rate. My Nance shall marry a laird—and that before long!”

My father bowed as only a Scottish gentleman of the old school, or a playactor can nowadays, gravely, graciously, gracefully. For in Galloway, as elsewhere, it is possible for the plain yeoman to be a complete gentleman.

“Your daughter may marry whom she will, and welcome! As for my son——”

Peter Chrystie laughed a shrill, chuckling laugh.

“Ye think, maybe, he will get siller wi’ her, the young fool; but hear to this, man, he would not get a copper if he married her the morn. I would leave it every farthing to Grace. She has more sense than Nance onyway!”

“Has my son asked you for any of your siller?” said my father, going a step nearer to the dyke. I knew how angry he was by the slow peacefulness of his voice.

“No, he hasna!” said Peter Chrystie, a little alarmed, and getting ready to descend.

“Then your silver and your gold perish with

you!" cried my father sternly. "If my son were so much as to ask for a pennyworth of yours, Peter Chrystie, I his father would cast him off for ever."

"Then, if ye be so mighty pridefu', e'en keep your roving, thieving brood some deal nearer hamel!" growled Peter.

My father did not answer in words. It was not indeed a time for more words. Instead, he strode forward to the march-dyke and gripped the farmer of Nether Neuk by the neck, who screamed like a throttled hen in the grasp of the executioner.

"The argument of David in order to persuade Nabal the churl!" said my father, "who, like you, Peter Chrystie, was such a son of Belial that a man might not speak with him!"

So, with a little jerk of his arm, he sent his opponent flying lightly off the dyke-top, and I heard him fall with a splash into a pool of dirty water on the other side in which the sheep had been washed for months.

Then my father strode away with his shoulders square and his head up, like King David returning from the slaughter of the Philistines.

And as I listened to the curses Peter Chrystie invoked from the green scum of the "Dub"

upon every scion of the McQuhirrs of Drumquhat, unto the sixteenth and seventeenth generations, I realised that I had indeed some distance to travel before I could call Nance Chrystie my wife.

CHAPTER XV.

FOUR LETTERS.

But in Galloway at least, consent of parents (or the lack of it) does not much affect the intercourse of those in whom the fire of love burns mutually. I did not trouble Peter Chrystie with any interview on the subject of immediate marriage with his daughter. Nor did the master of Nether Neuk say a single word to Nance which might have indicated that he knew anything whatever about the matter. The laird of Butterhole came a little oftener, perhaps, and had rather more extended opportunities of pressing his suit. But that was all. Nance openly wore my ring with the Water-of-Dee pearls upon her finger, and if Peter remarked it, or was informed of the circumstance, certainly he never "let on" to her, as the children say in the parish of Whinnyliggate.

In due time I again took my departure for the college of Edinburgh, walking all the way

with my staff in my hand, up green straths and down the sides of heathery mountains. My box had gone on a week before by the Dumfries carrier. And at every other turning I came on other brisk lads, who, like myself, were the hopes of muirland homes, and the favourite pupils of birch-wielding village dominies—the hope of their country too, and of the world.

Most of these bright-faced, clear-skinned lads were in full chase for the ministry of the kirk. A few were studying the Arts for their own sakes—I myself was bound to be a doctor. But whatever our several goals, each one of us discussed “Fate and Free-will (the perennials of Scottish youth), Fore-knowledge absolute,” as well as the Right of Veto, Kirks and Creeds, Intrusion and Non-Intrusion—the topics of the time—and then last of all we fell back on our sweethearts. But all the while I spoke, and often when I listened, I would slip my hand covertly inside my coat to feel the little hard lump which meant Nance’s own mother’s ring, and my half of the lucky sixpence she and I had divided between us, which Nance had cunningly joined to the ring with a hairpin.

“Ah-ha!” I was saying all the while to myself, “you are all very fine fellows, doubtless, but

you haven't a sweetheart among the lot of you like my Nancel!"

By-and-by we found ourselves in winter quarters, living sparsely, working eagerly—I on the inexpensive and malodorous verges of the Pleasance, the others settled here and there throughout the city, according to their inclinations and the depths of their purses.

Letters came to me week by week, wafered and sealed in black and red, every one of them with Whinnyliggate stamped on each line and syllable. So that whenever I saw one of these lying on the musty, green-figured, landlady's table-cloth (which was turned after every meal), a kind of lonely emptiness took me sharply in the pit of the stomach, and I longed almost to the breaking of my heart to be again scouring these well-kenned braes and—and, well, all the rest that Whinnyliggate meant to me.

The letters were usually somewhat as follows:

First, from my father, on quarto paper, water-lined, closely written, red seal.

"DEAR ALEXANDER,—I had pleasure in receiving your last, containing an account of the great Non-Intrusion meeting. Things are spiritually and otherwise very quiet in this part—lit-

tle interest being shown by either ministers or people in living religion, save one here and another there among the remnant of the true Kirk of the Covenants. Mr. Osbourne upheld the banner grandly last Sabbath, speaking for two hours on Jeremiah 24th, and first and third. 'The Lord showed me and behold two baskets of figs. And he said "what seeth thou, Jeremiah?" And I said "Figs—good figs, very good, and the evil figs, very evil, that cannot be eaten, they are so evil."' This Mr. Osbourne applied with great effect to the present stir in the country, proving that after all there are but two kinds of folk in Scotland, even as there were but two kinds of figs in the prophet's basket—true Cameronians, that is, and the others. The congregation was greatly pleased, and many are speaking of making up his salary another ten pounds in the year, more especially as the Established folk, both Moderates and High-flyers, are neither to hold nor to bind, saying that they ken well whom he was hitting at. As you may imagine, it was a great day at the Kirk on the Hill. You might take a step along next Wednesday to the market at Lauriston and see what are the best prices going for black-faced hogs—I am not satisfied in no way with the Dumfries prices. I am glad to know that the Professors open their classes with prayer

every morning. If they are worthy men, it ought to be a very improving exercise to the students. —I am, dear Alexander, your affectionate father,
“ALEX. MCQUHIRR.”

“*P. S.*—Do not forget to give me the texts at *both* diets of worship. It is a great privilege which is yours, of sitting under such a man as the Doctor in the Sanctuary of Lady Lawson’s Wynd. Also mind to tell me the Psalm upon which he prefaces, and as many of the heads and particulars as you can charge your mind with.”

This was my father’s subtle way of ascertaining whether I attended church twice every Sunday. But as there was another Cameronian student in the next street to me, we took it day about. My notes were the best, for I never could sleep comfortably in church all the days of me.

Then there came a letter from my mother, written small, on ruled paper torn from an old copy-book, unsealed, laid on the top of a box of scones.

“DEAR SON,—I am sending you this by carrier’s cart (and mind do not pay him one farden more, the greedy wretch wad stick at naething). There is some eggs and butter, also soda scones.

My hoast is some better, and the pain in my side has gone. I am eating weel. Dinna forget your prayers, and to change your socks every fortnight. Ye should get white sarks washed cheaper than ye say. Three pence for one sark is an imposition, and the buttons no sewed on. I fear Edinburgh is but an ungodly city. O, dear son, keep oot o' bad company, and put on dry shoon whenever ye come in. Be careful o' yer siller, for ye will get nae mair. There's ten shillin's that I got for eggs last Monday. Ye will find it wrappit in white paper at the bottom o' the butter crock. I'm dootful o' thae carrier bodies—they are no chancey. Your faither kens nocht about the siller, so write that ye got it safe on an odd scrap. Dear son, dinna forget your auld mither, that thinks with unshut eye on ye mony a nicht when the rats are cheeping.

“*P. S.*—Nance is weel, and looking weel. She spak' to me at the Kirk on Sabbath, and speered gin we had heard o' ye. That was kind o' her and thoughtfu'. She didna want us to think that she got mair letters than us. But for a' that I jalloose she does.—Your loving Mother.”

Third, from the Hempie, folded to represent a ship in full sail, crumpled, stained with apple

jelly, thrust into the cover of the next epistle in order.

“Alec, I sweered I wad not write ye anither scribe, so I winna. Ye are a beest and nothing but. Three times to Nance for yince to me, and ten pages in every letter o’ hers! I put the picture o’ you on Nance’s table on her birthday, as ye telled me, and hid ahint the door. When she cam’ in, she gaed up to the glass to see if her curls were becomin’—the conceited madam—and then after pookin’ at them a wee, she sees the pictur’ lying. She gies a bit scraich, like a cat when ye tramp on its tail, and she begins kissin’ the silly thing and greetin’ ower it. It made me fair seek to see it. And she said—— But I’m no’ gaun to flairdie ye up by telling ye what she said. Ye think eneuch o’ yoursel’ as it is, Mistir Alexander McWhurr, Junior, Doctor. But, as sure as death, it will be a lang day and a short yin before I carry on as daftlike as that about ony lad. Lasses are silly light-headed apes—that’s my last thocht o’t—and men are ten times waur. My cat has three kittlin’s, and ither three that was droon’t. Nance has a new hat with red berries intil’t. She doesna look bonny in it ava; so ye needna think it. If my next letter is no as lang as Nance’s, never another

scrape ye'll get frae me.—Your obedt. Servt. to command,

“THE HEMPIE.”

“*P. S.*—There's a braw man hame frae the pack somewhere oot o' England. He has a gold watch as big as a Sweedish turnip, and the cheen is as thick as your wrist. He has muckle black whiskers, and he often comes here to see Nance—or so he lets on. But I ken better, the hair-oiled *seefer** that he is. He asked Nance wha gied her yon ring. Says she, 'I'll tell ye that, Master Murdoch, when ye tell me what richt ye hae to speer the question!' Mighty me, but that was spunky o' Nance, and the auld man sittin' there! However, I'm feard he will set my father's back up about the ring. For they are great cronies. But the Hempie kens a heap, and if there's a key-hole in Nether Neuk, the Hempie will ken mair or all be done.

“*Second P. S.*—Nance has never lookit twice at a *sowl* since ye gaed ower the hill. This is fack as daith, and dooble daith.”

It is small wonder that I looked with great longing for the Hempie's very unconventional letters. They always told me exactly the thing

* *I. e.*, miserable wretch.

I wanted to know, and precisely that which Nance did not and would not tell me.

But, lord! what a stound my heart gave when on the green table-cloth lay a daintier letter, whiter than the others, different altogether somehow, with handwriting upon it like the delicate Hellenic script of some ancient cursive. It would begin—

“Laddie Mine, do you think of me still at times, or have the bonny lasses (really bonny, I mean) of Edinburgh town quite driven both Nance and Nether Neuk out of your head? Be sure and tell me in time, so that I may make up to the Laird of Butterhole. I think I may have a chance there yet, though I hear he was over at the Sunnyknowes seeing Jeanie only the week before last. So I must hurry if I am not to be left lamenting. Do you know, I went to the pear-tree to-night at the darkening? There was snow on our seat. I brushed it off and leaned my head against the bark. But somehow it was not half so nice. Something was wanting. I could not think what—unless it was a great stupid lad in a certain coat of grey, which it is much nicer to rub one’s cheek against than any old tree. I am glad he is tall, that laddie. My head comes just to the right place—for me, at

least. And as for *him*, I have not heard him make any complaints, so far.

“I wish, oh, how I wish he were here now, that lad of mine. Are his eyes as blue as ever, I wonder—his brow as broad and white, his shoulders as square, and his hair of the same bonny nut-brown? And if he were to find me waiting for him where this letter is, when he opened the door quickly and came in from his classes, would a glad, glad look flash into his eyes and the red of the morning flood to his cheek? Would he say, ‘*My Nance! My Nance!*’ just as he used to do when we met by the pear-tree in the orchard? Tell me if you think he would. But if he has forgotten the little lass with the aching heart so far away, please don’t tell me yet awhile. For I would keep my heart happy while I can. There is another man bothering me, Alec. But a thousand men do not matter to me and my lad. For (down with your ear and let me whisper) I love my laddie—*I love him true!*”

“Now don’t you wish you had a sweetheart like me?—I have the honour to be, Mister Alexander M’Quhirr, respectfully yours,

“NANCE CHRYSTIE.”

CHAPTER XVI.

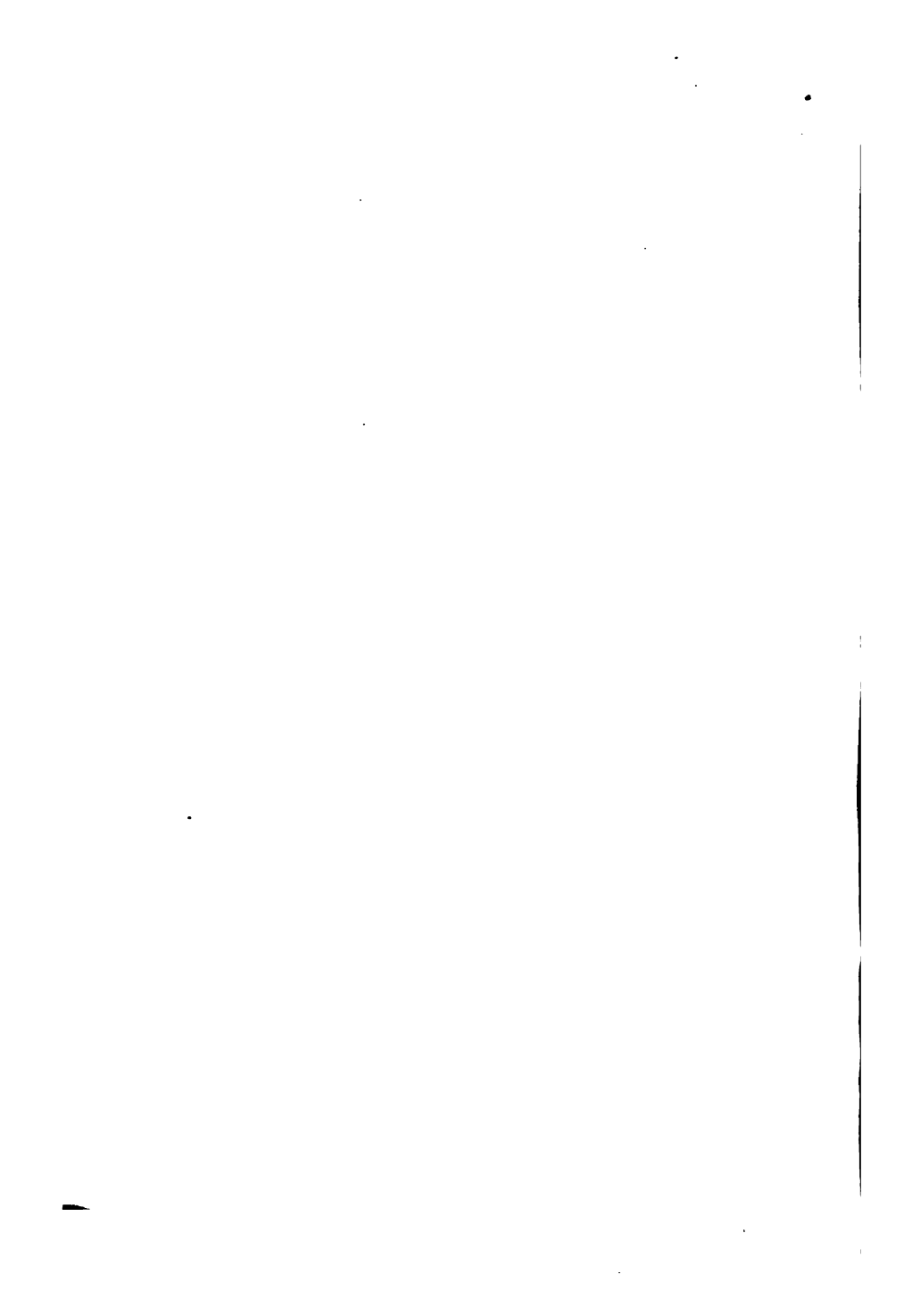
THE GHOST WALK.

In such vocations as these a little more than two years passed away, ere under the easy university regulations of those days, I was back again with my diploma, and waiting a month or two at Drumquhat for a vacancy in the assistantship to Dr. Armstrong, the leading Doctor in Cairn Edward. I had not had a holiday of such duration for nearly three years. I had, it is true, often been to and fro between Edinburgh and our quiet Galloway parish. And always I had found Nance everything that heart could desire—which was a marvel, for my heart desired a great deal in those days.

But now I had returned, I hoped “for good.” It was not long after the Hempie and Nance had written me the letters, which by the condescension of the higher powers I have been permitted to quote above. Some things appeared very different from what they had seemed in the old



"I wish, oh I wish he was here now."



days, when I went philandering over the countryside with Matthew and Allan.

Nance, indeed, looked the same, save of course that she was bonnier than ever—taller, too, it seemed, more graceful, more perfectly developed, with a look as if her clothes had somehow grown up about her, like the sheathing of a flower where the calyx protects the petals before they open fully out. She did not appear to have waked in a hurry and put on some one else's apparel by mistake, a misfortune which seemed to have happened to most of our Whinnyliggate maidens whenever they arrayed themselves, regardless of expense, in their Sunday best.

Even the Hempie wore long dresses now, and walked no more on the roofs of pig-styes. But her heart was still hard against the tender passion, and I found her as notably free of speech as ever when she and I forgathered by ourselves.

“He's juist the black De'il himsel'—weel brushed and curry-combed!” said the Hempie.

She spoke of Mr. Nathan Murdoch, the man of whom Nance and she had spoken in their letters, and whom, upon this his second visit to the village, I had not yet seen. Nance and the Hempie united in cordially detesting him. Lazy Grace tolerated him, because he did not pester her particularly. Only Peter welcomed him to

Nether Neuk, because he was reputed to have come home with a fortune, and to be looking out for an estate to buy as soon as one came into the market.

Indeed Nathan Murdoch, J. P. (of Bolton-le-Moors and Chorley—with a branch at Preston) was nothing loath to speak of the great and flourishing business he had left behind him, the fortune he had made by inducing poor women to buy, unknown to their husbands, articles for which they had no earthly use, at three times their value, and best of all, to pay for them by weekly instalments on a new and original plan of his own—which at the end of a year left them deeper in his debt than they had been at the beginning.

It was not long before I had the inestimable advantage of meeting the "Jye Pay," as he was called, from the initials of his honourable office. At the first glance I could see that Mr. Nathan Murdoch did not like me. My own feelings with regard to Mr. Nathan will find adequate expression as this narrative proceeds. I found him, personally, a floridly handsome old-young man with a curious droop of the left eye-lid, and blue-black hair which crisped and "kinked" so tightly that his head appeared to be wrapped up in a stray remnant of Astrakhan rug. He was rather

tall, and walked with a knowing, well-contented swagger, carrying a gold chain thick as a ship's cable across his waist-coat, as proudly as if it had been a certificate of character.

It is not in fallible mortal to decide offhand what manner of man will win his way to the hearts of women. This only I say, that had I been a woman, the very sight of the greasy self-sufficiency of Mr. Nathan Murdoch (late of Bolton-le-Moors and Chorley, and a distinguished ornament of the travelling Scotch trade thereof), would, in the simple and untutored language of the Hempie, "have made me *seek*."

But certainly this was not the general impression in the parts about Whinnylriggate, and even as far as Cairn Edward—where (it was whispered) the gay bachelor had aired his fascinations with all too fatal effect at a Subscription Ball.

Even before I had seen Nance, I was warned against the dangerous influence of the "Braw Packman."

"Aye, Alec," said James Campbell of the Black Craig, as he went by me with a bag of salt on his shoulder, "so ye hae lost your sweet-heart! I'm rael vexed for ye. But a bonny lass, Alec—we a' ken! O the craiturs!—they do juist wi' us as they like. But it's a Guid's blessin' that there aye plenty of decent hizzies, maybe

no' juist as bonny to look at as your Nance, but every bit as serviceable, that will be glad to jump at the like o' you and me when the time comes."

Or again, it was my mother who said, as I sat at my tea on the evening of my return from Edinburgh, a meal which, all trembling with excitement, she had prepared with her own hand, "Ye will be steppin' ower by the nicht—nae doot. Ye'll dootless hae heard the Nether Neuk news every week?"

No one who knows not my mother has any idea what indirect speech means, however thorough his classical training may have been.

"Aye, mither!" I would reply, "I hae heard nearly every week—whiles frae Nance and whiles frae the Hempie."

"Nance will hae been writin' regularly—na?"
(This suggestively.)

"Ow aye, mither,—what for do ye ask?"

"Oh, naething ava—I was only speerin'. There's a bit mannie frae the English side, wi' a desperate heap o' siller and a desperate lack o' manners, that has been a deal about the Nether Neuk this while back—ye will hae heard o' him, nae doot!"

I told her that I had, both from Nance and the Hempie.

"Weel, ye will ken best, nae doot," said my

mother; "but they say that he is fair fond to get Nance, and that it will no' be her faither's faut if he doesna' wed her before the year is oot."

"Hoot, mither!" I answered blithely, "did ye ever ken either laird's son or 'prentice mason-lad come into this parish, but the silly tongues o' the sillier folk evened him before the darkening to Nance Chrystie? I'm sure ye nicht mind yoursel' what it is to be the bonniest lass in a' the countryside—and no' let them misca' Nance, juist because every loon with a pair o' legs makes straight for the Nether Neuk to speak aboot seeing her, as if she were the wonder o' the world!"

And indeed so I thought her.

"Hoot awa, lad!" cried my mother with a quiet like smile, "dinna came flairdyin' * me. Ye canna blaw in your mither's auld deaf lug wi' daft speeches. Keep them for the young lass ower by. No that I hae ony fear o' Nance mysel'. She would never set that ignorant lump o' pride against my lad, for as muckle gowd as there's solid granite in Criffel!"

It was a bonny gloaming in the heart of May when I set out to see my dear, my mother watching me from the door, a smile on her lip and a tear in her eye. After all that had come and gone,

* Flattering.

I mind it clearer than I remember what weather it was yesterday—or, as it might be, how much I put into the plate at the kirk last Sunday.

Everywhere there was spread abroad the green haze of Spring. The buds had just come forth with a rush after such a winter as only our grandfathers had seen the match of. I went over to Nether Neuk by the hill road, skirting the moss-hags, where once in so ignominious a case I had listened to the interview between my father and Peter Chrystie. A belt of tall and gloomy firs lay along the ridge to my left, like an army encamped under dark-green tents.

In the level sunlight of the evening the lofty pillars of the Scotch-firs glowed red against the dusky caverns of the spruce-wood behind them.

How eagerly I sped along, only a lover can tell. For it was six months since I had seen my dear—to my hungering heart at least six centuries.

I expected to meet her by the corner of the orchard where grew the ancient, mouldy pear-tree which, to make one bond the more, we called by excellence "ours." It had nothing of the chilled snow now upon its bole, but waited, I knew, all duly Spring-cleaned, set in order, and fit for habitation.

So as I skirted the pine-wood on the edge of





The Ghost Walk.

the moor, I chanced to lift my eyes from the clump of pleasant, glimmering, light-green beech-trees, about the nestling white houses of Nether Neuk to the gloomy pines on my left hand. Something was moving there, which my eye had been conscious of without seeing. When I came to the corner of the dyke, I could look into a loop of the pine-forest called the "Ghost Walk," because once, long ago, a certain white lady had walked there of nights. The Ghosts' Walk was a gulf of green and brown where the turf young grasses of the moor and the burnt patches of last year's heather ran far into the circumambient woodlands of Larbrax.

As I looked, I saw the figure of a girl walking across the belt of green from one side of the clearing to the other. Her figure was slender, yet, somehow, stately also, and she moved with ease and freedom. She was dressed in what appeared to be the latest fashion of the day, and she carried the great broad-brimmed, fashionable hat of the period in her hand. No sheeted white lady she!

Surely there was none in all that land who could look so like my love.

"Nance!" I cried, and again the louder that she did not answer, "Nance!"

It was broad daylight. The sun was setting,

it is true, but with a full hour of his journey to go, sliding easily down-hill all the way, ere the Orchar and the Black Craig o' Dee should hide him from the broad pastures and peaty solitudes upon which since early morning he had shone.

Now there could be no mistake. I saw the girl as clearly as though I had spoken with her. She was not more than a hundred yards from me, clear both of the woodland and of its indigo shadows. Yet when I cried "Nance!" and looked for her to turn and greet me—without a word, without a glance over her shoulder she glided mysteriously to the edge of the pines, and, just at the place where the shadows were of the deepest, disappeared.

She did not run into the wood. She did not hide behind the trunks of the trees. Simply, she was and she was not. I overleaped the dyke, and ran with hasty steps to the place where I had seen the figure cross the glade of green. I walked along her footsteps, so far as I could judge, to the exact spot at which she had vanished. But not a turned blade of grass, not a foot-print, not a sign of life, sight nor sound of human creature could I discern, though I went some distance into the wood and called loudly and urgently.

I own that I returned to the open moorland from the precincts of the "Ghost Walk" with a

feeling of relief. I was a qualified healer of my fellow-men. I flattered myself that I possessed the best scientific training of the day, and I knew that my teachers had often informed me that mysteries did not exist, save such as might be discovered by lens and scalpel. Yet all the same it was indubitably pleasant to be out again on the open hill-sides and within cry of the wholesome houses of living men.

At the corner of the moorland nearest the white quadrangle of Nether Neuk, I sat me down to spy out the land. The kye were home, as I knew by the bareness of the pasture lands. To a dweller in dairy countries there is a peculiarly well-clothed and fair-garnished look about a broad field dotted with grazing kine. But neither black Galloways nor yet reddish-brown white-flecked Ayrshires were to be seen on the Holm Croft nor yet on Dunnimyre—the two chief pastures of Nether Neuk. They lay unpeopled, forlorn, swept of their browsing head-tossing adornment of bestial. For it was milking-time, and they were all safe in stall. I think the feeling of loneliness which strikes one in looking at such bare fields may be chiefly compounded of the old hereditary fear of the raiders from over the border, who, not so long ago, left uncropped pastures and empty byres in their train. Mixed

with this, there is the more modern rustic feeling that in the heartsome byre, where the cows are meekly chewing their cud while they are being milked, is centred for the time being all the mirth and jollity of the farm-town.

Sorely and oft did I wish that I dared venture down among them. I seemed to hear the talk run from end to end of the row of milking maidens. The white streams hissed with a pleasant tinkling sound into the milking-pails. I knew exactly how—loud and bass when the “luggies” were empty, passing into shriller treble as the white tide brimmed higher and higher within.

But not that night was the byre of Nether Neuk for Alec McQuhirr. Ever since the affair of my father and Nabal the Churl by the march-dyke, the Jew had no dealings with the Samaritan, and to the master of Nether Neuk the mere name of McQuhirr was an offence.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE PRINCESS NANCE.

So there I waited, impatiently enough, in the mild evening light, till I should see the milkers come from the byre, and Peter settle himself indoors with his paper, to prepare himself by a copious comparison of prices for the "troke and barter" of Drumfern market on the morrow.

Often, as may well be imagined, I glanced about me to see if the mysterious maiden of the woodland glade might not glide over the hill and, sudden as a pixie, look out at me from the other side of a moss-hag.

But only the silly peewits dipped and circled, or a whaup dropped complainingly with her long and beautiful stoop to the nest on the bare peat. Maiden of earthly sort there was none nearer than the byre. The moor lay behind me, alternately grey and purple, purple and grey, to the uttermost horizon.

At last the milkers came trooping out. First

there was Grace, sedate and finely stolid, carrying her full pail carefully in her hand. Then came the Hempie with a stray lad in attendance, at whom she struck after her fashion with her milking-stool, as he followed her through the doorway. Then, more tumultuously still, a miscellaneous pour of lads and lasses, almost like a kirk skailing, for it had been high festival in the byre that night.

But still no Nance.

I could not understand it. Was it possible that after all I had surprised my own sweetheart in the open forest glade, and that she had fled from the sound of my voice?

While I sat thus wrapped in uncertainty and meditating many strange things in my mind, I heard a footstep behind me. A stone rolled from a dyke and a man sprang over. I had never set eyes on him before, having been in Edinburgh at the time of his first visit, but I had no difficulty in recognising Mr. Nathan Murdoch. Here was the dashing exterior a little faded, the thick chain of gold, the densely crisped hair, the black whiskers, the twisted aspiring moustache so wonderful and entrancing to the rustic eye. The fellow passed so close to me that I could see him well.

“It is a fine evening for looking the sheep,

my man!" said he, speaking with a significant and it might be, an insolent accent.

He swung down towards Nether Neuk with a kind of defiance in his gait, which set him not very ill.

He had come directly from the glade, and he went towards Nether Neuk! But spite of my mother's hints, I knew that the thing suggested was wholly impossible. Such a fellow might perchance take the eyes of some woman, but not of Nance Chrystie, with half a dozen parishes to choose from—and her choice already made once for all.

I waited till the sun had sunk behind the misty ridges of the Orchar, and all was quiet about the farm beneath. Then like a stalwart ghost, I cautiously rounded the garden and out-buildings.

The pear-tree made a dusky umbrella of darkness as I overleaped the wall and stood beneath it. A blackbird sprang away with an indignant *check-check* of protestation. He, too, had considered himself settled for the night, so that he had some reason to be aggrieved. Besides, he was still a bachelor, while all his mates had taken domesticity upon them weeks before. So that he had constitutional license to be cross-grained.

There came a glancing whiteness about the

little strip of path where the garden joins the orchard. A trip of a light foot, and my heart bounding so fast that it nearly stumbled as it went!

She was coming—coming to me! It was the eternal idyll of love—sometimes its tragedy.

And to the pear-tree came—the Hempie.

“Nance canna come juist yet!” cried the Hempie, without greeting or preamble, as soon as she came near enough, “she has been oot by, and that ugly thief, the Braw Packman that my father is so fond o’, is sittin’ in the parlour, so Nance has to bide till Grace comes in frae the milk-hoose!”

“Did Nance send you to tell me?” I asked.

“Na,” said the Hempie, “but I kenned ye would be like a ragin’ Bull o’ Bashan oot here. So I cam’ to tell ye, to keep ye frae dinging doon the byre.”

“Was Nance at the milking?” I inquired.

Instantly the Hempie tendered me the swift, keen look of one who, from a hill-top of amplest information, glances down to see how much another knows.

“No,” she answered readily enough, “she couldna get the nicht.”

“What hindered her?”

“ I think she had had a sair finger, and could-na’ milk! ”

“ If I were going to lie, Hempie, I would lie better than that. ”

“ Very like, ” retorted the Hempie, with much aplomb, “ ye hae had a deal mair practice. If there’s ony mair ye want to ken about Nance, juist ask hersel’ when she comes—and tell *her* that she’s leein’ . ”

And the Hempie would have taken herself off in a huff, had I not run after and captured her, not perhaps all unwilling. She had grown greatly since I saw her, and her dresses were made almost to her ankles now.

I mentioned this when I made my apologies and congratulations, but asked if upon occasion she did not find the extra length difficult.

“ O, ” said the Hempie, looking down, as if such a thing had never suggested itself to her before, “ that makes less difference than you would think. I juist haud the skirts higher up when I run, that’s a’ ! ”

A door shut softly somewhere. The gate clicked sharply between us and the house.

“ I’m awa’ , ” said the Hempie, “ be kind to Nance. Dinna be feared. She is a’ your ain. I ken Nance. ”

Bless the wild lass! It was kindly meant,

but I did not need the Hempie to tell me that.

Then there flushed a sudden warmth into the air, a breathlessness took me in the throat, and a certain wondrous proximity which I felt but had not time to see. Then came a blurr, a feeling that I must laugh and cry at the same time, a heart beating against a heart, and we were "together." Ah wondrous word! Love's Mecca of prayer and pilgrimage.

"Nance!"

"Alec!"

That, for a space and a space, was all we said.

"I thought you would never come!"

"I thought I should never, never get away!"

"And you love me as much——?"

"You are sure you——?"

Then when we were entirely sure, and when we had quite done leading the proof of these important allegations, by mutual consent a truce was called to look at one another. We went back a step to hold back each other's heads and study them critically in various lights between our hands.

"Sweetheart, you are far bonnier than ever!"

"Alec, I declare your moustache has grown. You get better looking every day!"

Ye gods! what was my diploma after that!

O sad-hearted, drab-coloured lives, all ye who never under any apple tree, the joyous green bower of bliss, nor beneath the friendly shadowed portico (ere the door opens, home—returning under escort), nor yet by the chance thrice-happy street-lamp which the wind has blown out, have tasted the goodliness of the flower of life and the fruitage thereof, from the bottom of my heart I pity you. You have never suffered, it is true—sacrificed, sinned, risen to the skies, fallen to the depths. Ye have but walked the official highway and felt your feet grind monotonously on, through the grey dust from the entrance gate of Life to its last turnstile—at which stands the Angel who checks the records and bids us turn right or left. Ye have missed some ill, doubtless. But have ye ever found the Good? Ye have never lived—no, not so much as the myriad birds that fly northward in the spring, to build their nests where their progenitors did a thousand years ago; not so much as the fish that swarm up the river, chilly lovers they, or the stags that bray defiance to each other across the mountain shoulders.

“You were not at the milking to-night, Nance?” I said presently.

I saw my sweetheart gradually pale to the lips. A pitiful look came into those sweetest eyes of hers.

"Have you seen the Hempie?" she asked a little faintly.

"She was here just before you came," I answered.

Nance brightened somewhat.

"Then she has told you——"

"The Hempie told me nothing. I asked her nothing. You, you my Nance, shall tell me just what you will."

"Ask me, Alec," she said a little faintly, but with very true eyes.

"Tell me, Nance," said I, "were you in the upper wood to-night?"

Her face grew yet more pitifully white, and the appeal of her eyes was most piteous.

"Alec, laddie," she rather whispered than spoke the words, "can you trust me? I would tell you all now, but it is not my secret—at least not for a little longer. Can you wait a while to know? Do you trust your little love?"

"My sweetest, do not be grieved," I said, "I can wait to know anything as long as you like. Only I saw some one dressed like you, walking towards the wood to-night as I came. I called, 'Nance, Nance!' You ran from me—or so I

thought. And then I could not find you though I searched the wood from side to side."

Nance seemed to pause a moment, as if about to speak. I am sure that one doubtful look would have made her tell me all even then. But I wished her to know the length and breadth and depth of my confidence in her. So I smiled and said, "Nance, lass, I do not wish to know. I shall know all that is good for me to know, in my love's own time."

"Alec!" cried Nance, softly, throwing her arms about my neck for a reward, "you are the true lad—the one true lover. I never thought it of any man. That is the way I want to be loved. But it will not be long. You shall know all very soon. And then you will love me—yes, you will love me then."

I assured her that this was a most unnecessary conclusion, for that I could not possibly love her better than I did at this moment.

"O, but you will," she said, nodding her head confidently. And she looked at me with a grace so subtle and so admirably provocative, that I took her hand and kissed it as if it had been a queen's.

"My Princess!" I said with fervour.

She stood on tiptoe, and taking my face between her hands, she kissed me daintily, like a

roseleaf that falls on your face as you lie on the grass on a summer's day.

"My love!" she said.

We heard a gate click again, and then on the orchard path a light uncertain footstep. It came towards us irregularly, with pauses as if the owner were listening or watching.

The pear tree under which we stood, was high, many branched, and thick of leaves.

"Up with you, Nance," I whispered, "it may be your father!"

I took her hand, and in a trice we were seated high up within the wide spring of a branch which leaned towards the wall of the byre. It was an obvious risk, but Nance and I had all our cards on the table at any rate. And I thought that if the worst came to the worst—why, both she and I were of age, and I could take her away. I was a man (with a diploma) and I felt equal to providing for the one woman in the world.

After some minutes, which to us seemed hours, a dark, tall figure appeared under the pear tree, and stood almost immediately beneath us. It was not Nance's father, but—Mr. Nathan Murdoch!

He paused, listening hard and eagerly. His head was bent forward and he moved with a peculiar clumsy alacrity. He looked this way and

that, like a wild beast stalking its prey. He peeped cautiously round the corner of the byre to make sure that he was unobserved. Then he climbed the wall and disappeared up the way to the hill where I had first seen him.

I felt my poor little love tremble as she rested in the hollow of my arm.

“What is the matter?” I asked, “are you cold?”

“Oh, I hate that man,” she whispered, “I am afraid of him.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

LOVE-MAKING WITH A DIFFERENCE.

I was not long in making the closer acquaintance of the "Braw Packman." Whinnyliggate has few recreations, save those of standing about the bridge on summer evenings, and in quietly subdued tones, talking over its own domestic affairs.

But in addition it has its quoiting-green.

Before I had taken it into my head, that it was the proper and whole duty of man to sally forth a-nights to "see the lasses" at Nether Neuk and elsewhere, I had given many hours to the study of this most ancient art of casting the disc of metal through the air, and sending it ringing against the pin. I even laid down a "rink" at home with well-moistened clay from the Folds Burn. And there with the serving-man and sometimes a neighbouring lad or two, the nights were shortened by the ringing clank of quoit on quoit as a good shot was covered by a better,

or enlivened by the shouts of triumph as the guide-paper was snatched from the pin-head and buried deep in the clay.

One evening I had been down at the village on some errand for my father, and I chanced to pass the village-green, the scene of many a struggle and many a victory in the old pre-Nancian days. An unwonted crowd was standing by the gate, and in the midst I saw Mr. Nathan Murdoch, a glow of confident pleasure on his face.

"There's a lad that will lower your flag, Nathan Murdoch!" cried someone in the crowd.

Half a dozen voices hailed me.

"Come here, young Drumquhat, here's a man waging a pound note that he can play ony man in the pairish of Whinnyliggate."

Now very certainly I had no desire to play for money. More than that I had no pound to spare. But a substantial farmer, James Campbell of the Black Craig, ran out to meet me.

"For the credit of the pairish and his ain sow's guid," he said, speaking earnestly and privily to me, "gi'e the puir blawin' craitur his licks. And here's the pound to do it with!"

With that he thrust his arm through mine, and fairly dragged me into the quoitin'-ground.

"And is this the herd laddie that is to play

me?" Murdoch cried tauntingly, when he saw me, "me that lickit Taylor, that stood up to Walkinshaw five times, and beat him every time——"

A pair of quoits were thrust into my hands. I had indeed a dozen pairs to choose from, for the vanity and pretence of the Packman had been past endurance. Much as Whinnyliggate adored financial success, it loved still more to see a boaster laid low. We were soon in the midst of the game, and I found that though the Packman could boast, he could also play at quoits. Not only so, but he was good enough to accompany every successful shot of mine with such remarks as "What a fluke!" "Lord, that was a lucky ane!" While each of his own, if it fell anywhere near the pin, was a signal for jubilation among his tail of sycophants.

Slowly the score mounted. Rung by alternate rung we over-climbed each other. We were "twenty all" and the game as usual was twenty-one. One more "end" would finish it. The Packman had won the previous shot. He was croosely confident. His first quoit fell within three inches of the pin. Mine followed better by an inch. He cast his last with great care and skill, for it rested half on my first quoit and half on the head of the pin, hiding the paper com-

pletely from my view. I walked to where I could see the problem which I had to solve with my single remaining heavy disc of iron. It was considered barely possible that I could shift him. Still, I thought it might be done. The whole green held its breath. The quoit sped, and as soon as it had left my hand I felt sure that the shot would succeed. The rim of my quoit, descending, took Murdoch's on the extreme edge with a ringing sound, sending it several yards away, and lay dead in its place! A shout went up. I had won the match with a shot to spare, for my other quoit lay but an inch behind the first.

James Campbell of the Black Craig shouted uproariously and slapped his thigh. He had made several bets besides the principal stake. He was, therefore, in high good humour, and went about "uplifting" his money from the depressed supporters of Nathan Murdoch.

"Young Drumquhat will maybe no win back Nance Chrystie so easy!" I heard one of the Packman's sycophants say, with the obvious intent that I should overhear him. Dick Hamilton was the name of him. He was the son of the village shop-keeper. He followed the braw Packman afar off, wore the same kind of ties, and had similar tastes in the matter of hair-oil.

"Say that again!" I said, turning to him abruptly.

He laughed fleeringly, with, nevertheless, a certain trembling in his mirth.

"I said it once!" he answered glibly enough.

There was a low wooden paling round the quaiting-green, and beyond that the road ran westward, straight into the red eye of the setting sun.

"Once is enough for me!" I said, for I had no words to waste on Dick Hamilton. So I knocked him clean over the paling on to the road, where he lay spread all abroad, like a corn sheaf that has been ill-banded.

"Hey, what's that?" cried Murdoch, coming towards me in a hurry.

"Just a small matter between Mr. Hamilton and myself!" I said pleasantly. "Would you like to say over again to Mr. Murdoch what you said before?" I asked of Dick as he gathered himself up.

But Dick thought better of it, and only grunted truculently as he walked away.

As soon as I won clear of the village, I saw before me the long ridge of Ben Gairn flushing red with the evening sun, and the moors running smoothly westward in overlapping folds of gold and green. Instinctively I quickened my pace.

Nether Neuk could be reached from this side as well as from the hill on which I was wont to look my sheep. Already I could see the sacred tree-tops about it, though the white houses were hidden.

A girl was walking demurely towards me, as I turned the second corner, and at last glimpsed the white gables of the Chrysties' farm. My heart leaped wildly. "What is Nance doing on her way to the village, when she is trysted to meet me by our pear tree?" I thought.

But when I came nearer, I saw that this was not Nance, but a girl, duskier of skin and a trifle less tall, with great, dark, vague eyes—eyes that I had seen somewhere before. I could not for the moment think where. She flushed as she looked up at me, and quickened her pace to pass without speech. Then in a moment I knew her.

"What! The Hoolet!" I exclaimed in complete astonishment.

The girl stopped, embarrassed, and looked down at her dress.

"Why, you have grown a young lady all at once!" I cried, stepping back to look at her.

"Aye?" she said slowly, "ye think so, Alec!"

"I thought for a moment you were Nance!" I replied, paying her the highest compliment in my power.

The girl smiled more frankly.

"Ye wad be sair disappointed," she said.

"Well, at least I am proud to see you so bonny and so well put on," I answered cheerily.

The girl lifted her hand and looked at the well-fitting glove, upon the long wrinkled wrist of which was clasped a bracelet of gold.

"Aye, is it no bonny?" she said, a little wistfully, as a child might, and then after looking long at it, she dropped the arm again slackly to her side.

I did not keep her longer, because in fact I had an engagement elsewhere which I did not greatly desire to put off, and also because the girl was palpably uneasy as she stood making crosses in the dust of the road with the narrow toe of her boot.

"Guid-e'en to ye, Hoolet—or Miss 'Lizbeth, we will hae to say after this!" I said, smiling to her.

"Guid-nicht!" she answered softly, with her eyes still on the ground. And without another word she moved away and left me standing.

As I walked slowly towards Nether Neuk, I thought of the surprising change in the appearance of the Hoolet since last I had seen her, a ragged, curly-pated scarecrow. She had not the free swinging gait and erect carriage of my lass,

but so far as dress went, she was a fairly exact copy. I could see that Nance Chrystie had been the Hoolet's model. Or might it not be that my generous Nance had given her an outfit from her own scanty wardrobe? If this were so, I pictured to myself, with pleasure in the thought, Peter Chrystie's disgust if he knew that the Lazy Taed's ragged lass was masquerading to the village in the garments bought with his well-spared siller.

Nance was at the tree before me. As I jumped the dyke I could see her impatiently stripping a pliant twig of willow between her fingers. She had a scarlet shawl thrown carelessly about her shoulders. It had fallen a little back and dropped over one well-gowned arm—I have no words to tell how charmingly.

"Ye are a nice anxious lad, Alec, to let me be first at the tryst by half an hour!" she cried, before I reached her. I knew by the clear, unguarded tones of her voice that her father was not in the vicinity of Nether Neuk.

I made my peace without difficulty and explained the matter of the quiting-match. As soon as she heard of it she laughed lightly.

"O, *of course*, you beat Nathan Murdoch," she said confidently, patting me on the arm with a quick, proud movement characteristic of her.

"There was no 'of course' about it, I can tell you," said I, a little crossly, "he was none so easy to beat!"

"But you beat him — yes, I knew you would!"

"And how could you know, Nance?"

"Why, because you are *my* lad!" she said, looking boldly at me.

"Because I won you that were so hard to win," I answered, "you think that everything else is simply 'ask' and 'have' — 'want' and 'take!'"

Nance's reply could hardly be called a toss of the head. It was a movement so slight, at once so deliciously insolent and so graceful, that it might be called rather the spiritual essence, the disembodied ghost of that disdainful gesture.

Nance Chrystie had been too often told of her worth and beauty to have any mock-modest doubts as to her own value. She knew she was worth the winning, and the delicious pout with which she closed the discussion was at once apology for the past, provocation in the present, and forewarning of the future.

"You have saddled yourself with a bonny handful!" she said, smiling. "Are ye no feared to gang to your bed at nichts, Alec McQuhirr? Will ye no tak' your ring back again?"

And the monkey held out her left hand with the Water-of-Dee pearls shining mistily upon it.

I took the hand and reverently kissed the ring, as my mother had told me she had once seen the Old Laird do to her own mother at a country-dance, before he led off the tenants' ball with her. For I revered Nance as well as loved her, and I did not know how else to show her how deep was my respect, how loyal my worship.

Nor did I go unrewarded. Nance looked up at me at once quickly and shyly.

"You are different from everybody," she said, with her eyes shining upon me, "do you know that you are the dearest thing, Alec. I am glad I promised to marry you. You can kiss me just once for that!"

After a pause of contentment she went on.

"But you are, you know——" she seemed to be explaining the matter more for her own satisfaction than mine. "You make love with a difference."

"Do I *make* love, Nance?" I said, for to my mind love made itself whenever Nance was in the neighbourhood.

"You never did anything else, since I ever knew you!" she answered pertly.

"Nance!"

The minx nodded three times as if that set-

tled the question. Never had I seen my lass so careless, so dainty, so prettily defiant, so deliciously wayward.

"Nance," I said, "do you know whom I met and talked to as I came along the road to-night?"

"Somebody coming courting me, no doubt," she said in her coolest manner.

"Rab Anderson's Hoolet!" I answered, looking directly at her.

Like a candle that is extinguished, the light went out of her face. The careless smile vanished from her lips. It seemed almost as if someone had struck her in the face.

"The Hoolet!" she quavered. "You saw the Hoolet!"

I watched her keenly.

"Yes," I said, "the Hoolet! What of that? You have been giving her some of your clothes, too. What would your father say if he knew, you extravagant monkey?"

"There are a good many things my father might say if he knew everything!" answered Nance significantly, recovering herself somewhat, "but what did the Hoolet say to you?"

"Nothing about you, Nance, little girl," I answered cheerily. For I saw there was something that she feared my knowing, and I had too



"Will ye no tak' your ring back again?"



great love and confidence in my love to care what it was. But strangely enough, Nance did not seem nearly so much relieved as I had expected.

“Poor Hoolet,” she said thoughtfully. Then after a pause, again—“poor, poor Hoolet!”

CHAPTER XIX.

EPHRAIM IS JOINED TO HIS IDOLS.

It was after this meeting that I first judged the Hoolet to be in deep waters. Nance, I saw, was at least partly in the secret, but for some reason she dared not tell me all she knew. Perhaps it would have been better if she had. At anyrate I was obliged to attempt a discovery or two for myself.

It was about this time, for instance, that I became a poacher. I do not mean an occasional trespasser and amateur (as it were), but a professional nightly frequenter of the woods, habit and repute, acquainted with every run of hare, each form, lair, and rabbit-hole, roosting-place of pheasant and couching covert of grouse and partridge. In a word, I went into partnership with Rab An'erson.

Now recent game legislation has made less difference in Galloway than in any other part of the Queen's dominions. The farmers now do by

day what formerly had to be done under cloud of night. Indeed the Game Laws have always been singularly honoured in the breach throughout the Ancient Free Province. And there are few, whether tenant's son, cottar's son—aye, or laird's son either, born 'twixt Nith-bank and the Back Shore of the Shire, who cannot charge their memory with sundry crimes of night trespass in pursuit of game, committed upon lands where certainly they had no legal business. It is the modern substitute for the smuggling of the last century, and perhaps also for the raiding and moss-trooping of the century before that.

Rab An'erson was known to be a poacher, but nobody thought any the worse of him for that. Indeed his very dogs betrayed him—smooth-haired, long-limbed, slinking lurchers which in the day-time yawned and slept about the back premises of his cottage under the covering fringe of the Lang Wood of Larbrax. Like their master, they only fully waked up at night. Then the elaborate listlessness of their daily behaviour changed instantly to keen alertness, as soon as Rab An'erson came slouching in and began to put on his leggings, and lay out the tools of his trade in due order on the bed, as one of my own profession does before a difficult surgical operation.

There were mysterious things hidden away in that curious rickle of wooden shanties, old tar barrels, hen-coops, and general conglomerate *débris* in the rear of Rab's hut, many of the dark secrets of which were know only to the Hoolet and the De'il.

On the top there were bundles of slim, supple, wicker wands ready for the making of baskets, at which Rab was a great expert. Under precarious coverture were stowed away coulter, plough-handles, "shilblins" or red cart top-rails of various design, corn-feed dishes, bushel measures, milking-pails,—which last, however, would only have known themselves under the name of "luggies." Then there were dozens of iron harrow-teeth, and nailed inside the back door of the hut the antlers of a deer fixed upon a brazen plate (supposed to have wandered off by itself from the big house at the time of the spring-cleaning, the De'il having been seen in the neighbourhood about the same time).

In the barrels at the back dwelled dogs of high and low degree. Some of them had, as the advertisements say, "followed a gentleman"—that is, they came to the Lang Wood of Larbrax in rear of the De'il or his father, with a rope round their necks, and their feet firmly braced against the ground. If the animal was advertised

for in the Cairn Edward Advertiser (with a promise of a reward), the De'il was despatched to arrange matters. And then the siller having been passed over, "Caesar" or "Yarrow" was duly returned, after sundry experiences which, alas, he could not communicate to his loving master, and in addition an entirely new breed of fleas to scratch for in his leisure time, which however were quite transferable. But if there was no advertisement, and no reward—well, there followed after the lapse of a certain time a plunge in the Loch some dark night, and the accommodation of a barrel was again "to let," under the shades of the Lang Wood of Larbrax.

Yet Rob was both a kindly and a popular character. He took the hares and the pheasants it is true; but, after all, the farmers would infinitely rather that Rab had them than that they should go to the Cairn-Edward game dealer patronised by the "big hoose."

Besides, after a successful night on any farm, there was always a couple of brace reposing on the dyke in the front of the house when the farmer's wife went out in the morning. These, in process of time, found their way into the pot; and if the farmer was a wise man, ultimately into his stomach, without a single question asked to indicate a knowledge of whence they came.

"They are fine bit chuckies, guidwife," he might say; "were they no layin' weel that ye drew their necks?"

"O, weel enuch, but they were desperate fond o' wanderin' awa' into the woods," the lady of the house would reply without a smile.

"Aweel, they will hae a chance o' bidin' near hame noo!" the guidman would say with equal seriousness, as he helped himself to the other leg.

Nor did the gamekeepers and water-bailiffs—the "watchers" as they were called—trouble their heads much about sleepy Rab. After all, they knew that he poached solely for home consumption. He undertook no export traffic; and besides, there was something about the slow, good-humoured giant which it was best to let alone. They knew the "Taed" for a sleeping dog that had better be allowed to wake of his own accord.

Also, was it not recorded in the annals of the "watchers" how that once upon a time, a newly appointed "gamey," unacquainted with Rab An'erson, had gone to Rab's cottage to see if he could see anything of fur or feather, which might explain the clean sweep of his cherished coverts the night before. Before he rounded the angle of the cottage, and just as he paused to look through the little gable window, his trained ear

heard the unmistakable sound made by the cocking of a well-oiled lock; and lo, there, within a foot of his head, protruded from a broken pane the wicked muzzle of an ancient musket. There was not a foot stirring about the place. Sabbath silence brooded over it. But that grim powder-blackened eye followed the intrusive "gamey" everywhere he went. So that in five minutes he was making a straight course down the hill, never again to explore on any consideration the mysteries of Rab An'erson's unwholesome domains.

I had arranged with Rab that he was to meet me at the march-dyke, in my capacity as poacher's assistant, one chilly autumnal night when the tryst by the pear tree in the orchard could not be arranged, owing to the fact that the farmer of Nether Neuk was entertaining a party within doors, which included the now wholly reconciled lairds of Butterhole and Sourdubs, as well as the Braw Packman himself.

So at the appointed time I repaired to the hill, and there, seated on two adjacent tufts of heather, I found my father and Rab An'erson. I kept unobtrusively on the lower side of the dyke and listened quietly. My father might have taken me home with him if I had ventured to join the pair. For even at twenty-one (I say it with pride) and with a diploma in my pocket, I should

not have dreamed of disobeying my father. Nevertheless I listened to their confabulation.

Saunders M'Quhirr, like the douce Cameronian elder that he was, was endeavouring to win Rab the poacher from the error of his ways.

"Rab," he was saying with a grave earnestness which sat well on his serious face, "this will never do—ye maun gie up the poachin', lad. I saw the 'gameys' after ye late yestreen. Ye will be gripped and gaoled some o' thae days. Besides the birds are no in season yet."

"Dod, Drumquhat," said Rab, "when we get the feathers aff them and the bonny darlin's in the pot, they are aye in season in Rab An'erson's cot-house. His family is neither dorty, nor yet hard to please."

"I could gie ye a job at the herdin' mysel'," said my father, "that wad pay ye better than Peter's, if ye wad gie up this ill-contrived poachin' and nicht wark."

"That is desperate kind o' ye, Drumquhat, and poor Rab will no forget it; but it will no do either for you or me. Ye see it's in the bluid. They say the father o' me was a gipsy. My mither mair nor jaloosed as muckle hersel'. Man, Drumquhat, even when I was a laddie o' ten, I hae ferrited rabbits under the very windows o' the auld laird's castle."

My father shook his head in a kind of hopeless protest.

“Na, Saunders M’Quhirr, ye mean weel,” the Ishmael of Whinnyliggate went on, “but it’s little use. I’ll poach as lang as I leeve, as lang as I see ane o’ the bonny, lang-leggit, grey cattle playin’ about their forms and holies or scoorin’ the field in the gloamin’ wi’ her lugs clappit and legs like a racer! As for the pheasants, the sicht o’ them fair gars my heart gang *wallop, wallop* against my ribs. The very rabbits doon there by the bank-side, are they no braw and denty wi’ their sleek bit sides and their white tails cockit, jookin’ like butterflies amang the grass? Do ye see that ane, Drumquhat?” he cried eagerly, as he pointed with his finger at a rabbit which poked its head inquisitively out of its burrow for a moment, and then popped back again in a fright. “That auld craitur has a family o’ fowr doon under the bank there—in the second hole on the left o’ the auld stump at the tap o’ the brae.”

“Rab,” said my father, “ye dinna mean to tell me that ye ken every rabbit in the countryside by head-mark, as if they were folk ganging to the kirk.”

“Ow aye,” said Rab calmly, “that’s the only way to poach. Ye maun ken every rabbit within three mile, every pheasant near and far by the

cock o' his tail, where he was reared and where he sleeps. The black woods maun be your dwelling hoose and the muckle grey fields your kail-yaird. The cloud o' nicht is your best friend and the quarter moon your stable lantern. Ye maun be mair at hame in the fir covers than in your ain back kitchen. Ow aye, the bit dogs and me—we are fell fond o' the big grey anes wi' the lang lugs, and also o' the wee hotchin' anes wi' the white tails. But we like them a' best wi' this bonny brass collar on!"

And the poacher held up for the elder's inspection, a beautifully made wire "grin" or snare, of which he always carried an assortment in his pocket.

I could hear my father rise, and balance himself on his staff. He heaved a sigh.

"Ephraim is joined to his idols, I misdoot," he said sententially, as he prepared to take his departure.

"Verra likely," said Rab, "I am no weel acquainted wi' Ephraim."

"Guid nicht!" said my father shortly, and betook himself along the dykeside in the direction of Drumquhat. He was going I knew to "tak' the Buik," and it gave me a pain (very transitory, however), to think that I would not be present at the evening act of devotion.

CHAPTER XX.

A POACHER'S NIGHT.

Rab An'erson nodded as I came over the dyke.

"I heard ye, Alec," he said, "ye cam' up there like a rampin', blunderin' bull. I wonder your faither did not hear ye!"

Now I thought I had stolen upon them like a shadow, but before morning Rab was to show me what still-hunting meant.

He gathered his traps about him from various holes and corners of the dyke, and in a minute we were at the edge of the woods. There the whole nature of the man seemed to change. His daily habit of "Lazy Taed" dropped from him as one drops his cloak before a race.

His two lurcher dogs slunk behind his footsteps with their heads down, till they struck a hot trail. Then they too appeared to change, and with erect ears and swift silent steps they were off.

Such dogs are worth a fortune to a poacher like Rab. The keeper, if he knows his business, always tries by poison or lead, to lay such animals a foot or two under the sod. For a dog which will hunt at night without a sound, and obediently and certainly bring to its master its entire "kill," is not to be replaced within a week nor yet within a year.

We plunged into the dark, dewy shades of the woods. Birches flung down their fragrant sprays on our heads. Fir spines rained thickly on my bonnet and slid down the hollow of my neck as I followed Rab upon all fours, head down like a beast of the chase on a quick scent.

Soon we found ourselves in the undergrowth of the best coverts, not far from the "big hoose." The darkness closed about us like a vault. Yet in spite of it, Rab Anderson made his way infallibly wherever he meant to go, running rapidly on his hands and the points of his toes, yet instinctively avoiding the dry branch which would snap under his weight, and the crisp twig which might break with a crack sufficient to frighten the shy, suspicious quarry of the woods, or bring the equally suspicious human "watcher" down upon us.

As we went, my instructor threw a whisper

or two of warning over his shoulder, but mostly he let me find my own way in his wake as best I could.

And the strange thing was, that in spite of care and caution, our progress in that tangled place was faster than that of a man walking on his feet in the daytime.

As the poacher proceeded, he kept his face turned upward to the lingering twilight which filtered through the dense trees.

All at once, through the close lattice-work of dark boughs, his eye caught sight of something. Instantly he stopped and clapped flat among the dry pine needles which covered the ground thickly beneath the upper coverture of stiff spiky branches.

His dogs, nameless, but generally discriminated as "You!" and "You there!" crouched silent and motionless in their master's tracks.

"For "You" and "You there" Rob had once been offered "ten notes"—refused with contumely.

I was not far behind the dogs, and, creeping forward till I came between their haunches as they lay like twin guardians of a shrine, I looked upward in the direction of Rab Anderson's fixed gaze. There I saw sundry dark shapes, set aslant against the lighter sky—shapes which obviously

did not belong to the anatomy of ordinary fir branches.

By inadvertence my elbow rustled some dried leaves, and Rab's foot instantly warned me to be careful while the dogs pricked their ears and looked reproachfully at me out of the corners of their eyes, keeping their noses all the time on the dark shapes overhead. I could see the long necks of birds poking out, as they craned this way and that to listen.

Now if any uninstructed persons had been in the laird's covers that night, those dark silhouettes on the branches would instantly have resolved themselves with a startled half-human cry, and a tumultuous rush of wings, into a flight of pheasants, and the watching "gameys" would have been upon the spot at the double.

But under Rab's tuition, even I—awkward pupil of a great master as I was—soon went far beyond that stage.

With the smaller fry, however, I still had trouble. The blackbirds, for instance, nestling in the thick holly bushes, would persist in flying out with indignant *keck-kecks* which alarmed the whole thicket, and advertised to every wood denizen that strange, cowering, leaf-rustling beasts were abroad in the dark underneath.

We lay a long while still to let the silence set-

tle itself again. A rabbit hopped down the wind, and had its fore paws upon my legs before it caught the scent of man. Then it turned with a startled rush and sped away. The dogs groaned almost humanly. Their teeth gleamed through the gloom, but so well trained were they that they remained each fixed and stiff waiting the word of command. They knew well that their master was in pursuit of nobler game than these hopping twinkle-tails, which might be picked up on every sandy slope.

I looked before me, and in the darkness it seemed as if Rab An'erson were slowly growing out of the ground. Silently he seemed to elongate himself inch by inch, as if he had been some rapidly growing shrub. Then when at last he stood erect, he took out of his warm bosom a few joints of smooth bamboo. The night was chill, with a shrewd nip of frost in the air.

The poacher held the bamboo in one hand, and rubbed its end against the upper branches softly, exactly as one branch does against another, when the wind blows and the trees sing softly to its cadence.

One noble cock-bird, foredoomed among the slumbering pheasants, acknowledged the attention by stretching his neck to the side, at first suspiciously, but afterwards, as the gentle wheez-

ing went on, with more toleration. At last the bamboo touched his feet, and now it did not alarm him. He had seen its gradual approach. It was warm, and to feet chilled by the cold bark of the branch and the frosty air, most agreeable. With a sleepy cluck of satisfaction he stepped out upon it. The bamboo was gradually lowered till Rab An'erson's strong right hand closed about his neck, and his cockship's sleepy, comfortable churl of bliss ceased without a sound to indicate that the father of a family had entered into Nirvana.

Rab was so excellent a poacher that he almost despised himself when he ceased to use his natural weapons against his quarry. Modern commercial poaching—a masked band, entering a covert with breech-loaders and clearing it from end to end with enough noise to scare the country-side, was Anathema unspeakable to such a purist as Rab Anderson.

He even made me feel ashamed of myself when, at the end of harvest, I set up a generous stook of well-piled sheaves in a sheltered loop of stubble among the woods, and filled my bag at short range, firing at leisure across the enclosure with a mere pinch of powder, which could scarcely be heard a hundred yards away.

Next Rab came on a hare, lying yet warm

across the path. Her neck was fast in a wire "grin"—the brass collar of Rab's epigram. Death, as the newspaper reports say, "had doubtless been instantaneous"—Rab had seen to that himself—not from motives of humanity but from those of caution. A hare caught in a badly set "grin" cries with a pitiful child-like cry, which is unmistakable; and which has often brought down the keepers, who, instead of picking up the animal, leave it to struggle till the poacher comes. Then they pick him up instead. Being well aware of this, Rab An'erson had set his snare where a fall in the ground made a little natural drop. Then he had drawn his foot along the other neighbouring runs, thereby forming insuperable obstacles of scent, which no self-respecting hare could pass, so that the unfortunate deceased had practically been shut in to self-destruction.

A covey of partridges, fluttering in a net, a bewildered rabbit or two, come to the front-door of his earth-house for a breath of the night air, a pheasant, a-swing by his neck from a loop tied to a branch—such were Rab's further acquisitions. The bag over my shoulders had grown heavy, ere we prepared to leave the woods. We were passing between the halves of the great boulder, which had been split in some boyish freak of the laird's, when there came to our ears

the sound, sharp as the screech of a pencil on a school slate, which the steel-rimmed heel of a boot makes when it slips sideways on a stone.

Rab cowered flat in an instant, listening with animal intentness. On either side of me the lurchers lay motionless, their ears set forward in the direction of the sound, far too well trained to bark or move, and indicating their interest only by a gentle push of air through their wide nostrils.

We were close to the wall which separated the covers from the field. Rab looked cautiously over. He moved his hand, turning it a little forward, and in an instant I was beside him, as still a hunter every whit as he. In the uncertain light I could see a man and a woman walking together across the sward. They went slowly and in deep discourse towards the very fir trees, where, on the evening of my coming I had seen the girl so mysteriously disappear.

Rab grunted contemptuously.

"It's no the keepers after a'," he said in rather a disappointed tone, "some daft, gallivantin' nicht-rakers. Come this road away frae them."

And he turned at right angles to the course of the preoccupied pair, who, linked closely together, had by this time passed over the grey turf into the farther blackness of the woods.

I could read Rab's kindly thought clear as print. He believed that the girl was Nance Chrystie, and, judging me to be hoodwinked by that fickle young and designing person, he carried me off in a direction in which I should be clear of her ongoings.

But I knew that this nymph of the woods was no daughter of Peter Chrystie's. In some ways it would have been better if it had, for Nance was a clear-headed, straight-purposed person, singularly capable of managing her own affairs. I pondered over the matter all the way home. But certainly neither anger nor jealousy were in all my thoughts. For better or worse I knew that the Maid of the Ghost's Walk was not my Nance Chrystie, the lass of the leal heart and the thorny tongue.

CHAPTER XXI.

“ FOLLOWDICK! ”

When I met Nance the next morning by the pear-tree I told her what I had seen the night before, and also how Rab An’erson had so thoughtfully spared my feelings, turning off sharp in another direction in order that I might not guess how my sweetheart was walking the midnight woods with a favoured rival.

“ You are sure Rab thought it was me? ” said Nance, with a shade of anxiety in her tone. I had told her the tale that she might laugh at it. But her face was grave even beyond her wont at the kirk on Sabbaths, and apparently she saw nothing laughable in my excellent adventure.

Nance stood a while thoughtfully with her hand on my arm. She always did this when she wished to coax me to anything against my will.

“ I think you an’ me will gang poachin’ up by the wood of Larbrax this nicht! ” she said. “ I’ll run in and get a wrap. ”

The autumn twilight came grey and cool. The nights were already closing earlier in. The snell scent of the "back-end" of the year was rising from the ground as I waited by the orchard-wall for the arrival of Nance. The French window silently opened, as soon as the light in Peter Chrystie's chamber announced that the head of the house had stretched himself between the blankets.

Silently as a broad leaf falls, Nance was again by my side, a dark cloak over her shoulders, and her pretty head nestling in the hood which was drawn close beneath her chin by a dainty ribbon. She took my hand, and without a word spoken between us, she drew me in the direction of the dark woods, where twice I had seen the mysterious figure. But we were not clear of the high orchard-hedge, when behind us we heard a light foot. Nance drew me back into the shelter of the hawthorn with a swift movement of the wrist.

"I see ye, Alec and Nance," said a voice in a cautious whisper, "dinna think that I'm no comin' too!"

It was the Hempie.

"Gang hame, Daftie," said Nance, "we are no wantin' you."

"I daresay," replied the young lady with infinite self-possession, and a determined stamp of

her foot; "I daresay no, but a' the same I'm comin' wi' you, if ye gang as far as Jericho!"

Then it was that Nance used that local term of reproach, which is so full of mystical significance that it is only to be permitted in the greatest extremities.

"FOLLOWDICK!" she said, almost hissing the word at her sister.

The Hempie was distinctly staggered, as well she might—for the epithet implied at once the meanness of a spy, and the superfluousness of the third party in those affairs of love where two is company, as well as the contemptible nature of one who not only imitates another, but thrusts his ungrateful society upon the imitated.

However, the Hempie did not long remain stunned. The conscious rectitude of her intentions and the desperation of the case, urged her to set aside the insult, which on another occasion would have sent her back to her room like a dog bidden to lie down.

"I dinna care!" she said determinedly. "'Followdick' or no 'Followdick,' I'm no' gaun to let my sister traipse to the Lang Wood of Larbrax at this time o' nicht wi' Alec McQuhirr or ony ither lad."

"How do you know that I am going to the

Lang Wood of Larbrax?" demanded Nance imperiously.

"That is no' the road to the kirk, that I ken o'!" returned the Hempie with meaning.

"I only wish it were, Hempie," I hastened to say in order to slacken the tension of the scene.

"I daresay," said the Hempie, "when ye hae stood up before the minister, you and Nance can please yoursel's and gang your ain gaits—to Keltonhill Fair an' it like you. But till then the Hempie is comin' wi' ye. So tak' your accounts wi' that!"

"Let her come!" said Nance suddenly, making, I fear, a virtue of necessity.

"Come on, Hempie!" I whispered.

"Na," said the Hempie, "I'm no' comin' along wi' ye. I'll come ahint ye, an' ye can talk your ain talks oot o' my hearin'. Dinna think that I want to hear ony o' your silly, saft blethers!"

Thus in two divisions, with the Hempie as a sufficient rear guard, we arrived at the edge of the Lang Wood, in which most of our operations of the previous night had been conducted. I helped Nance over at the corner of the dyke, but the Hempie scorned the proffered assistance, and even Nance took the matter more as a compliment than as a necessity.

Presently we stood behind the dyke, almost on the very spot from which Rob and I had seen the pair cleeking across the grass the night before. Here we waited and the woods were still all about us. A belated whaup cried far out on the edges of the moors. A jack-snipe whinnied unseen somewhere overhead. It was very still, and presently it awed and silenced even the Hempie. I had drawn Nance's cloak close about her, and was holding it so as we leaned against the dyke and waited, looking out with all our six eyes upon the grassy plateau before us as on the empty stage of a theatre before the curtain goes up. After a little the Hempie came close to me on the other side from Nance, and humbly took my unoccupied hand for company.

Thus we must have stood well-nigh half an hour, till I began to fear that our promenaders of the night before were going to disappoint us of the sight we had come so far to see.

But all suddenly, round the corner of the glade nearest to us came a dark figure walking swiftly—almost running indeed. It was a tall girl with long loose locks floating about her head, and wearing a short ragged kirtle, kilted half way to her knees. She was quick and lithe in her movements, moving noiselessly and swiftly past us towards the wood. She disappeared as quickly and

mysteriously as before, seeming to melt into the darkness opposite where we stood. A curious cold thrill passed down my own back. I could feel the Hempie clutch my hand firmer, and even the adventurous Nance, the Woman of Wise Secrets, nestled more closely against my side.

After a long pause we saw come out of the wood almost at the same point, another figure very different in appearance, even when seen in silhouette against the grey night glimmer which seemed rather to be given out by the dewy grass than to come from the sky.

But now we were looking at no mere stripling girl. The figure was that of the woman whom I had seen on the evening of my arrival—a woman tall and well attired, clad in a flowing robe of silk or some other lightest material. Above, upon her head we could see plainly the wide dark sweep of a Gainsborough hat, which completely hid her profile from our view. There was something of the wild woodland's creature in the lithe grace of carriage, the simplicity of action with which she moved. As she passed near to us, I could see the girl bend sideways and take her skirt in her hand with a quick, graceful action. Then she let it fall and did it over again as she walked, for all the world as if she had been practising the movement for a ball-room.

Ever and anon, the girl would stop in her walk and look towards the open end of the loop of green sward, where the Ghost's Walk opened out upon the wide, misty fields. It was clear that she was expecting someone to join her.

Nor had she long to wait.

A man came towards her with quick springing steps. The girl instantly dropped her skirt and ran to meet him. There in the midst of the glade we saw them kiss each other. Then she took his arm and the pair began to walk up and down slowly, their faces angled fondly to one another, and their voices coming to us in a continuous murmur of sound.

At this point I began to feel acutely the creeping meanness of setting ourselves as spies upon the action of two lovers. I thought of the pear-tree in the orchard. I took Nance's arm to draw her away. But she refused with a quick impetuous jerk which betokened infinite interest and determination.

As the pair passed and repassed it was ever the man who talked and the girl who listened. At least her replies were too low for us to overhear.

"I tell you what I say is true," the man was asserting vehemently, "we can be married here and now, if you will, and such a declaration of



marriage will hold as strongly and surely as if you had been married in the kirk itself. I have studied the law of Scotland, and I know——"

Here the speaker passed out of range. When they came back he was still pleading.

"Here and now, darling—what better time? You are ready to take me for your husband. I will take you for my wife!"

They stopped simultaneously at the words, almost within touching distance of us. The man stood opposite to the woman and took her hand.

"I take thee to be my wedded wife,"—it was the man's voice which spoke. I knew it for that of my adversary, Nathan Murdoch, "to be my wedded wife" (he repeated the words more loudly), "and I promise to be unto thee a true and loving husband until death us do part!"

Then, instructed by him, the girl repeated a similar sentence as he held her by the hand.

"I take thee to be my true husband before God and man, and I promise to be unto thee a faithful and obedient wife till death us do part."

The man slipped his hand into the pocket of his waistcoat, and drew from thence something which he slipped upon the girl's finger.

"There," said he gaily; "it is all over except the parson's kissing the bride. And there—that also is done! Did I not tell you it was easily

managed, and God in heaven be our witness that we are truly man and wife."

So, indeed, God in Heaven was a witness. But in the wood shadows there were other witnesses whom Mr. Nathan Murdoch wotted not of, and witnesses perhaps even more important. For the Almighty cannot be called to compear in any earthly Court of Session.

The pair who had taken such vows upon them, little recking of the marriage guests behind the dyke, passed slowly across the open glade and disappeared into the wood. Silence shut down upon the Lang Wood of Larbrax, save that the snipe still whinnied, and a questing owl whooped past with a soft, noiseless fluff of brown feathers.

We drew our breaths a little quickly after having held them for so long. Then we moved quietly away to the corner of the wood at which we had entered, and so back across the fields and stiles to the glimmering white houses of Nether Neuk, where not a dog barked as I held the French window open for the entrances of Nance and the Hempie.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE REFORMATION OF THE LAZY TAED.

Events marched swiftly after that. Nance, indeed, waxed more and more mysterious every day. The Hempie blindly supported her. Peter spent almost every night in company with the two lairds of Butterhole and Sourdubs, and with them was often to be found Mr. Nathan Murdoch.

I saw less of Nance also, because by the following month I had obtained the coveted assistantship to Dr. Armstrong, and the duties of my profession took all or nearly all my attention. Nevertheless Dr. Armstrong, in his capacity of parish doctor to the district of Whinnyliggate, remarked that the percentage of cases requiring attention there was greater than it had ever been during his thirty years' tenure of office. Yet there was no apparent epidemic to account for it.

Nor, being a young practitioner, did I feel myself qualified to say why this should be so.

One day as I drove along by the dyke towards Nether Neuk, hoping with some reasonable confidence that I might see Nance at the corner of the loaning (I had forgathered with the Hempie on my way up the Glen), I came on Rab An'erson, looking strangely unlike himself. At first I could not make out wherein the difference lay. Yet assuredly there was a great one somewhere. At last I had it. Rab wore a coat. I had never known him get beyond a ragged shirt and a pair of trousers in my life, save on those very wet days when he put on a sleeved waist-coat.

His son, the De'il (so it was said), usually exchanged with the nearest "craw-bogle" when he wanted a new outfit. But here plain to the eye was Rab himself, decently clothed, and with a new blue bonnet on his head, instead of lounging about in picturesque rags, hatless and stockingless, at some dyke-back on the muir.

"What in the world has come to ye, Rab?" I asked with some anxiety. For indeed it was a portentous thing to see the poacher-herd so keen on the proprieties.

Rob looked at himself from his boots as far as he could see in an upward direction. His glance displayed an acute sense of shame. Then he took off his bonnet and regarded it with extreme dis-

favour, turning it about in his fingers and looking at it within and without.

"It's that misleard lassie, the Hoolet," he said at last, "if onybody had telled me a twal-month since that Rob An'erson wad hae pitten on the like o' thae duds—Sunday or Saturday—I wad hae gi'en him a dunner on the side o' the heid."

"What has the Hoolet done to bring this about?" I said.

"Done?" said Rob indignantly, "I kenna what has come to the craitur. She is forever fykin' an' cleanin'. There's no a dish oot o' its place in a' the cot hoose. The floor maun be washed every mornin'—soopit twice a day nae less. The grate is polished till you can see your face in the bars. She tried to get me to gang outside to hae my smoke. But, fegs! Rab An'erson drew the line there. An' then there's hersel'! The Queen o' Sheeba is no in it wi' oor 'Lizbeth!"

Far away out of the hollow beneath us, more like an echo than a living human voice, came sougning Peter Chrystie's elricht refrain to which he conducted most of the work of the farm.

"Saw ye ocht o' Rab An'erson, Lazy Taed? Saw ye ocht o' Rab An'erson, Lazy Taed?"

Rob slid nonchalantly off the dyke in his old

indolent manner. Then he inclined his ear hillwards, and it was with a relishing sigh of relief that he said, "It's a Guid's blessin' that there's aye thing that's no reformed about this farm-toon, an' that's the auld deevil doon yonder. Here till him, he maun be gettin' fair foamin' wild by this time."

So with that, Rob, to show his new born zeal, slid yet farther down the side of the dyke farthest from his master. He lay listening with the pleased and happy expression of a child put to sleep to the sound of a well-known lullaby.

"Saw ye ocht o' Rab An'erson—Rab An'erson, Lazy Taed?"

The words came strident and separate, like a stick repeatedly struck on a wire fence.

"It's soothin', doctor," he said dreamily; "it's maist wonderfu' soothin'!"

And as I started my old white mare, which had been standing contentedly between the gign-shafts, I could see Rab An'erson, with his pipe stuck at a convenient angle, beating time with his tobacco-box to the refrain of the master of Nether Neuk as he tracked the hill-side to and fro, looking everywhere for his most unprofitable servant.

"Saw ye ocht o' Rab An'erson—ocht o' Rab An'erson, La-a-azy Taed?"

As I listened to the long drawl of the Gallo-way vowels, I decided with a smile that Rab's repentance and reformation were not yet serious enough to hurt him.

When I saw Nance at the loaning foot that night I told her of my prospects with the old bachelor doctor, who was more and more desirous of confining himself to the patients immediately about the town of Cairn Edward. There was also, I thought, more than a chance of a partnership if I could muster up my courage to speak to my father. I was sure that we could pay the purchase money back rapidly.

But Nance was firm.

"Partnership, if ye like, lad," said she, "borrow from your father, honest man, if ye like. But ye shall never marry Nance Chrystie with debt hanging over your head if I ken of it—my man!"

And I admired her so greatly for her spirit, that had old Mary Grey been one whit less sedate, she might have wandered off to Cairn Edward by herself, to my infinite shame and undoing, during the tranced half-hour which followed.

Then after we had discussed our plans, and agreed that things would be pretty far advanced with us before we asked Peter of Nether Neuk

for his blessing, I told Nance laughingly of my meeting with Rab Anderson.

Her face fell at once—the mirth all stricken blankly out of it:

“Puir Rab!” she said, sadly; “puir, puir Rab!”

CHAPTER XXIII.

NATHAN MURDOCH MAKES A BUSINESS PROPOSAL.

It was in the midst of a stormy March that the greatest and most terrible night known in the annals of Whinnyliggate befel. And I must draw a breath before I breast this steepest brae of the tale.

For since our little moorland parish has but one tale to tell, as the great world counts stories (though a thousand of its own for each green knoll and hummock of purple heather, for each nestling cot-house, and stern square-lined farm-town) it is just and right that that one tale should be told with some care and circumspection.

Have you ever thought what a strange cross-section of life is revealed whenever a crime is done, which needs to have flashed upon it the indiscriminating bull's-eye lantern of human justice? A blow is struck in a house crowded with human beings. Each item of that crowd, each group of items is busy with its own proper con-

cerns—and ignorant of all the others—then, all suddenly, the knife, and lo! we have revealed what all were doing. A raffish lad is shot dead at a wood's edge, and in an hour, the whole human hive (of which the world saw but the undistinguished outside) is being cross-examined as to its doings, its seeings, its words, its thoughts, at twelve of the clock—the hour when Cain and his brother Abel had their last meeting. What were you doing? And you? And you? Behold, your tales agree not. What you allege was good enough for the business of the world. But we need better evidence now. Had Abel gone another way, that tale of yours might have passed. But since Cain met him and slayed him and left him, we must have other of it. The truth, man—the truth!

So, strangely enough, the night of Whinnyliggate's terror is known by the name of the man who, of all who acted in that tragedy, was the weakest and the worst. "Nathan Murdoch's Nicht," they call it—so strange is the tendency of the crowd to ticket a man by the scarlet patch no bigger than one's palm on his cloak of grey. But as I tell my story, the real hero of the night will appear clearly revealed for the first time.

It is not very difficult to set in order the tale now. From a thousand sources the facts,

the words, the countermarchings, the fell intents, the sacrifices of that night have been made plain, and have, indeed, long been common fireside talk. I who have the best right to speak of some part of this our moorland Iliad (though I saw not the terrible wrath of Achilles), have no right to speak of other parts, save that I know them as well as the things which my own eyes saw and my proper hands handled.

The first scene of all we know, not from the seeing of an alien eye, but from the muttered, monotonous testimony of two tossing, fevered heads, which from their several pillows furnished to nurse and doctor, the key of the secret chamber which contains our simple mystery.

The brief lowering March day had begun to merge into the long March night. The wind blew bitter from the north. The rain was changing into sleet, the sleet to snow, and whereas at one minute the whole landscape would be grey-white with hoary drift, the next a swift drench of scouring squall would go sloughing and plashing over the moorlands, threshing through the blind turmoil of the woods, and deluging the fields till all was forthwith turned to black again.

Once more the loop of turf by the wood's edge was not empty. A girl, not now clad in elegant costume, but close wrapped in a scanty

shawl, walked slowly up and down. She wore no sweeping plumed hat, for the gale would have torn it from her head. Sometimes she sheltered her eyes with her hand, and drew the shawl with monotonous patience over her hair, but nevertheless the glutinous sleet-flakes threshed into her face and clung hoarily to her eye-brows. She was now to make her agonised prayer to him who had gotten all his asking, the same who on this spot had called her his wife.

The grim swift twilight shut down into a glimmer, greyer night. It was not quite dark, for occasionally, through the breaks in the rushing cloud-river above, gleamed the broad sickle of the quarter moon.

The girl shuddered and walked more slowly, as if weighted down with weariness. There was none to help her anywhere. God she knew not, and the only two she loved were to cast her off ere the night had turned to morning.

It is little wonder that the storm was in her soul. The blast which hurtled across the moors, hissing level, stinging and chilling, might have been a zephyr for all that the plaid-wrapped girl knew or cared. She shielded her face indeed, not against the fury of the elements, but that she might watch more intently that grey strip of turf—across which he would come.

At last he came, booted, leather-gaitered, thickly-coated, a cap pulled well over his eyes and drawn close about his ears. And as soon as she saw him come, the girl sprang forward with a glad cry. Then all suddenly she stood still with her hand on her side, and waited for the man to advance.

Nathan Murdoch came slowly on, and then stopped, standing insolently and callously before her with his hands still deep in his pockets. It was the girl who at last went forward, and put her arms about his neck. The shawl fell upon her shoulders; the beautiful head was thrown back. The wind unloosed the banded hair and blew it about her eyes, till it threshed in the man's face and annoyed him.

He stepped back and pushed her from him with one irritable movement.

"Tie up that wisp," he said roughly, "and keep the shawl about your head!"

Yet in times bygone he had said a thousand times how beautiful was her hair, and the girl remembered each separate time.

She came near to him again, and this time he did not push her away. He thought that he might as well have it over as soon as possible, and be done with it.

"Well, what do you want?" he said with beautiful directness.

The girl laid her hand on his shoulder and looked up at him.

The water brimmed over from her eyes, softly, steadily. The spring was too full to fall in tears. She did not sob, neither did she utter sigh nor complaint. She did not demand anything from him. Only her eyes ran with water, hot and salt, which stung his hand as he held it against her breast to keep her back. And the man hated her more for that than if she had cried curses upon him, and stricken at him in wild fury.

"Well," he said again, holding his head a little back, "what is it that you want?"

The girl tried to master herself that she might speak, but could not for a while. The waters within were too high, they roared in her ears. The wind without swept her words away.

"I want you to come hame wi' me, Nathan—to tell my faither. I darena gang hame by my lane. God kens, I darena face him!"

"To face whom?" growled Nathan Murdoch, "to tell what?" Though well he knew in both cases.

"My faither—my faither!" she wailed. The shawl had fallen back again and the face might

have disarmed a devil, "To tell him, Nathan, that we are man and wife——"

The man, who at that moment would have been cast out of deepest hell by the darkest spirit there, as unworthy of such honourable refuge, laughed a short, ugly laugh.

"Man and wife!" he said, brutally. "How can I tell your father, or anyone else, such nonsense as that?"

The girl gasped. Her hand clutched instinctively at her throat, as if she were being momentarily choked. She undid the neck of her gown a little, unconsciously, to get a breath of air—this, be it noted, when the blast was yelling past, and the branches of the trees above creaking and *whoo-ing* as they rubbed and writhed in agony overhead.

"What is nonsense, Nat?" She drew nearer to him, "Did you not tell me here in this place that we were man and wife—before God, you said, and by the law of the land? Did you not promise me, and make me promise you too?"

"Doubtless," said the man, "but that was only courting nonsense. A marriage without witnesses is no marriage. You knew that very well."

"But you swore it, Nat. You married me—you gied me a ring. O ye wadna cast me off,

Nat—not your little lass that never denied ye onything?”

Then the man—no, the devil, I crave pardon of Lucifer and his angels—the Thing thrust his hands deeper into his pockets, for he was getting tired of all this. Besides, it was cold and he wanted to go back to the inn fire-side, which, indeed, he had made a sufficiently great sacrifice in quitting at all. He thought that a brutal frankness would serve him best on this occasion—as it had served him before with weak, yielding women.

“Listen,” he said roughly, “that about marriage is all fudge. Better say nothing about it to anybody. They’ll only laugh at you. I am leaving the country to-morrow morning. You can tell your father anything you like. Here are fifty pounds. Mind you must make the most of them, and don’t think that you can come on me for more. Or, I tell you, you shall never hear from me again. But if you are a sensible girl and make no fuss, I’ll send you something whiles by a sure hand.”

The girl’s white lips parted more and more widely while the man was speaking. Her dark eyes stared at him heart-brokenly from under her wind-blown hair, like the eyes of some dumb, helpless thing that is being tortured and buffeted without knowing why.

The man thrust a roll of notes into her hand. But the tense fingers did not close upon them any more than the branch of a tree would have done. His words had made no separate impression. Only his denial—only the sound of his refusal to help her had sunk in. He would not come back with her. She must face her father's wrath alone. He denied her as his wife. The roll of notes slipped from her hands. She did not understand in the least what it was. She was thinking of her father, sitting in his chair by the unbrushed ingle-nook. She knew he was listening for her foot, and wondering what was keeping her so long.

The roll of money fell unregarded on the sleet-grimed turf. The wind would in a moment have swept the bank-notes away as swiftly as if they had been last year's leaves—as indeed they were; the dry, dead leaves of a fond woman's summer folly. But the man, cool and self-possessed as when he bought goods wholesale, set his foot upon the package, and presently stooping lifted it and slipped it back again into his pocket.

Little by little the girl stayed her sobbing. The man continued to look sideways at her, wondering how long this was to continue. At last he spoke:

“Come,” he said, “this will never do. Be a

sensible girl, and it will be all right. I will come back again if—if you do as I tell you. I cannot tell anyone we are married just now. It—it would hurt my business. See, let me take you home, and it will all come right yet. I have to go to England to-morrow; but I will write you from Dumfries, and tell you where you are to meet me.”

He thought that was a good deal to take the trouble to say.

“Yes, Nat; yes!” said the girl, earnestly striving to stay the whirl of her mind that she might understand his words.

They were soon at the gable end of the little cot under the lee of the wood. There was a warmer smell in the air, the odour of burning peat.

“Now,” said the man, eager to get away, “be a good girl. I will write you—all will be as you wish it—good-night!”

The girl stood a moment, the snow-flakes eddying about her, watching him go. Then with a convulsive leap she sprang after him.

“Oh, take me with you now!” she cried, “my husband.”

It was in vain. The wind swept away her voice. The snow-squall hid him from her sight. He had settled his cap and gone off at top speed.

The girl turned about uncertainly. She looked up at the crack in the cloud-race overhead, through which the moon occasionally shot a glance of white triangular eye.

“He said I was his wife—and I believed him,” she said aloud, with her eyes on the cloud-rift.

She was explaining the matter to God.

CHAPTER XXIV.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

Robert Anderson, shepherd, cottar, poacher, sat within his house at the back of the Lang Wood of Larbrax, and listened for the home-coming of his daughter Elizabeth.

Lord! what shallow apes we human creatures be, shaking with laughter at the cock of one another's noses or the hang of our neighbours' tails! A degree's difference of angle makes all the difference between romantic tragedy and screaming farce. A man possesses a mouth of a peculiar twist. In virtue whereof he is a princely humourist—born in the motley, as it were. Every word he says is accepted as the wittiest ever spoken. Then having, on account of his facial trick been still further educated to the part, he plays up to his reputation ever after, and is throughout his life a conscious clown, at sight of whom the rustic and the courtier fall alike into indiscriminate convulsions.

Underneath that mask may there not be a tragic soul—a panic-stricken, pathetic heart?

Hoot away, man—what have we to do with any man's soul? Look at his mouth!

Or, on the other side of the fence, an inch or two in a woman's waist, a hair's-breadth of difference in the contour of her nose or chin, a quaint pretty trick of pouting her lips, a quarter of a finger-nail's length added to the dark sweep of her eyelashes—and there is an empire's difference in her fate, or in the fates of those about her. Destiny sits fateful in the dimple of a chin, and lurks in the golden specks which float in the limpid hazel of a woman's eye. A girl smiles with her lips, and it is naught. She smiles with her eyes, and—ah, then, the world of witching difference.

The agonised clown, at sight of whose contorted face, mirth-provoking, irresistible, the audience double themselves up, and jog elbows, crying, "Did ever any man see the like of that?" is a type of many a life when the mask is off, the veil lifted, the enamel washed out of the crow's-feet of care.

Rab Anderson, lazy as ever, but cleaner than of yore, sat and gazed at the fire. He was waiting for his daughter. The Hoolet—'Lizbeth—to mention for once her unfrequent grown-up

appellation, had shot up in a year or two from the rough, coltish lassie, with few distinguishing marks of sex about her, into a fair and beautifully-formed woman. And Rab Anderson, who in his love-time had had little joy in his wife, or indeed pride in her, now in a new spring of the affections, unlifted his heart with a great and secret pride in his daughter. Sabbath after Sabbath he had seen her start off for the kirk, dressed as well as any woman there, and his heart had been proud. He had never even asked how she came by her apparel. Nance Chrystie, he knew, had been kind to her. And when Nance set her heart upon a thing, it was as good as done.

“Lassie, lassie, this is an unco nicht for ye to be oot in!” said Rab without turning round, when at last he heard his daughter’s footsteps.

The Hoolet did not reply. She went direct to a great wooden servant’s chest which stood in the inner room, and busied herself with its contents.

“Lizbeth!” cried her father, lifting his head from his breast.

“Aye, father,” she said, commanding her voice to evenness as best she could, “what is it?”

“What like is the nicht?”

The girl tried to remember, failed, and grasped her shawl. It was covered with melting snow.

"It's dark, and the snaw has comed on," she answered simply.

"Aye, I was thinkin' it wad be a white nicht! It's far in the year for snaw, but there's aye a sair on-ding if it comes in March."

The boy, who has been known in the earlier chapters of this tale as "the De'il," sat sullenly whittling at a stick by the fireside. He had a three-legged stool between his legs. There was something on the De'il's mind. He was restless, and kept eyeing his sister suspiciously as she moved here and there about the house. Her haggard face at once annoyed and frightened him.

The De'il had something to say. He rose and thrust his hand under the broken-down bed, propped with an empty soap-box at the corner, pushing aside the neat vallance with which the Hoolet, since her conversion to tidiness, had decorated it. He drew out a parcel, stained as to its outside with rain. He tossed it over to his sister.

"There, Hoolet," he said, with a certain ill-concealed asperity, "there's a parcel I got frae the carrier. The morn's the Dumfries fast, and so he is hame a day earlier."

The girl stood as it had been stricken, with the package in her hand. Her face was white and more pitiful than death. For the white face of

death has its trouble over, but the Hoolet had hers yet to face.

The De'il's tone of suspicion quickened Rab Anderson to look up. His eye fell on the large brown parcel.

"Wha sent ye that, 'Lizabeth?" he asked, a little anxiously.

"Nance Chrystie, I suppose," faltered the girl.

The quick ear of the poacher caught an accent of the unknown, the terrible in her voice. He had heard something like it, when a wild thing is taken in a snare and first realises that escape is impossible.

"Open it!"

Rab Anderson's voice of command rang out like a hammer on an anvil.

"Nance Chrystie would never send things by the Dumfries and Carlisle carrier," muttered the De'il, still more sullenly. The Hoolet threw a look at her brother of such desperate appeal that he added—"that is, unless she had written for them beforehand."

But the diversion came too late.

Rab Anderson looked from one to the other—but most at the white face of his daughter, standing before him with bleached lips ready to lie it out.

“Open it up,” he said, “and let us see what’s in it!”

“It’s no things fit for a man to see, faither!” she cried desperately, trying to gather up the paper and escape into the inner room. And the Hoolet smiled at her father, trying pitifully to break down that dull reddish gleam in his eyes.

It was too late—the Lazy Taed had been aroused. Rab Anderson would see it through to the end now.

“Open it!” he commanded, raising his voice, “mind, I am your faither!”

Her fingers fumbled numbly with the string. She might as well have tried to untie the knotted cords with her feet.

Rab drew his sharp skinning knife, and in a moment cut the fastenings, inner and outer. A warm woollen shawl lay on the top. He stirred his forefinger amid the dainty whitenesses beneath.

As he did so his own face blanched and drew itself tense like his daughter’s. He held up a tiny garment, dangling it by a string.

He turned and looked down at her.

The Hoolet had fallen, face downward, upon the oaken settle. Something strange and unfamiliar about her struck her father and brother to the heart. Rab Anderson stood above his

daughter. His knife was yet in his hand, and so terrible was his aspect, that the De'il sprang in front of him and held his hand.

"Faither!" he cried, "for God's sake mind what you are doin'."

Rab Anderson looked from his daughter to the white little tell-tale hood that he held in his hand.

"Yours?" he queried, in a voice hoarse as the Dee in spate, when it is heard far off.

The girl, fascinated, kept her eyes on his. There came into her face no look of denial, to her lips no word of entreaty.

"Are you married?" was the next question, "tell me that!"

"*He* said so," she gasped, her lips and eyes alike dry and burning—no rushing tears now.

"And who saw ye married?" he father continued.

"Only him and—and God!" she replied, using the Name she scarce understood the meaning of. As indeed who does?

Her father's face grew yet darker, his voice dropped a tone lower till it was almost inaudible. He grasped his skinning knife tighter.

"Tell me the man's name!" he commanded hoarsely, stooping over her, "or by the Lord——"

“ If ye were to kill me, I couldna tell ye his name,” she said, “ he bade me no to tell! ”

And God (they say) will punish such as she in hell forever—then away with such gods!

“ Tell me the man’s name that said ye were married to him? ”

The voice of Robert Anderson was hard, inexorable, terrible as fate, and set the strings of his daughter’s heart quivering.

“ I canna, faither! I can dee—I wad be glad to dee—but I canna tell ye his name.”

And as she spoke her face was purified and sweet—looking up at him from her knees and craving her father to strike her dead.

It softened the strong man; for indeed Rab Anderson loved nothing else save the daughter of whom he had been so proud.

“ My lassie,” he said almost tenderly, “ ye say that he owned ye his wife. Tell me his name, wee lass. Tell yer ain faither. And he shall own ye before the world—I promise ye he shall. He shall own ye before God and man baith! ”

Once more there were tears in the girl’s eyes, great tears, too big to fall.

She clasped and unclasped her hands pitifully.

“ Oh faither, faither, dinna ask me like that!

I canna tell ye, 'deed, I canna. I promised no' to tell. I wad dee for ye, faither, but dinna ask me to tell. He daurna let his folk ken he's married to the like o' me."

He caught her fiercely by the wrists.

"'Lizbeth, ye shall tell, 'fore God ye shall tell your faither—who is the man!"

There was no answer; the gathering lakes in her eyes brimmed over at last. The white lips tasted the saltness.

He raised his hand as if to strike, and she smiled.

"Yes, yes, faither!" she whispered eagerly.

He thought she was about to give way. His hand fell to his side.

"Weel?" he said more quietly.

"I canna tell you, faither," she answered, quite clearly, "but I wad be glad—glad to dee by your hand, faither, if ye think they wadna' tak' you up for it!"

The De'il had been looking at some of the articles which had fallen from the package.

"There, faither!" he cried, spelling something out slowly, "let 'Lizbeth alane. Here is the man's name."

And he read slowly and painfully, "Nathan Murdoch and Company, General Outfitters, Bolton-le-Moors, also at Preston and Chorley."

“ Oh, faither,” she said eagerly, “ it isna’—it isna’ him!”

Her father stood towering over her, looking uncertainly from his son at the table to his daughter on the oaken settle.

“ Ye dinna need to lee, ’Lizbeth,” said the De’il, “ I hae seen him wi’ ye a score o’ times in the Lang Wood o’ Larbrax. And so has far mair than me.”

Rab Anderson wasted no time. He put on no overcoat. He had none to put on. He grasped a great, heavy-headed staff, pocketed his skinning knife, and opening the door, strode out into the night. The De’il sped after him like a shadow.

The girl lay on the oaken settle, dumb and dazed, till the night and the storm had swallowed them up as if they had been lost in the swelter of an angry sea. She rose and stood a moment in thought, with her hands pressed tightly on either side of her head. Then she drew her wet shawl mechanically about her, and, blowing out the flickering candle, she also went forth into the night of darkness and storm.

CHAPTER XXV.

DROWNED DUNCAN'S POOL.

It was a night when in spite of the tumult of the elements I hoped to meet Nance for a canny half-hour at the loaning foot. Mary Grey was getting used to these irregular and uncovenanted halts, not entered in the round book. For indeed their blessed frequency was beginning to deprive them of any irregular quality, specially as Dr. Armstrong was in the habit of saying before I went out, "Ye will find without doubt that the shortest way home is by the Nether Neuk road-end." This from my gruff and uncompromising chief was quite equal to an apostolic benediction from one more demonstrative.

Nance had been out of the house time and again to look for me. Once more she threw a herd's plaid over her head with a deft swing, so that it shed the storm from about her as completely as the rigging of a house. But this night she had been often disappointed, and, as we

know, Nance could not be called a young woman of infinite patience.

Peter Chrystie could be heard, as was usual with him, alternately lecturing and hectoring in the ben-room, chiefly for the benefit of Grace, but with a word or two to Nance when she was supposed to be within hearing. The Hempie sat demurely on a stool in the kitchen and watched her step-mother, Clemmy Kirkpatrick, stirring the porridge. The byre lass whistled "Ower the Water to Charlie" among the milk-pails in the dairy, and a neighbouring ploughman, who dared not come into the kitchen for fear of that omnivorous tyrant, Peter Chrystie, waited on chance favours in the back porch, ready to flee out into the night on the least alarm.

Peter Chrystie's servant lasses, like his daughters, had to do their wooing in the barn or by the dyke-back. And well I wot, if harm came thereof, not the least share of the sin, great or small, will one day when the Great Balance is struck, be debited to Peter Chrystie.

Meanwhile, within his comfortable parlour Peter growled and rumbled and thundered, till the little universe of Nether Neuk trembled before him. But Peter the Tyrant, whose least word was law, knew not that bleak March night how soon he was to meet his match, how brittle

was his sovereignty, how near and sure his humiliation.

“ I’ll give the wretch one other chance,” said Nance to herself, as she slid the wet plaid again about her, “ I’ll listen for his pony’s feet, and if I canna hear them coming up the wood, I’ll come in and think no more about him. He could surely have been here by this time if he had liked! ”

It was a terrible threat, and might have terrified a lover less assured than I. But it lost much of its effect, even to Nance’s own mind (which was the only one cognizant of it), from the fact that she had said the same thing each of the last half-dozen times she had run light-foot through the driving push of the storm to listen for the jogging clatter of Mary Grey’s horse-shoes.

Nance has told me the tale a thousand times. I know all she heard and saw that bitter night better than I know the contents of my pocket-book at this moment, or the way to the pencil with which I write my prescriptions.

With her head bent low, my lass made her way down the short avenue, but did not open the gate nor go out upon the road. Instead she ran down to the edge of the Lang Wood of Larbrax, where it throws an outlier of spruce and

Scotch fir across to the "lane" *-side. From the corner she could look down the straight piece of road which skirted the gloomy water so closely that with a walking-stick you could paddle to and fro the yellow bulbous water-lily blooms anchored out in the still, black pools of the lazy, sluggish, peaty "lane."

The road glimmered grey between the black trees and the blacker water. The sleety snow drave hissingly up it, and the wind shrieked through the lower under-copse on either side. Up on the heights the tall beeches and sturdy oaks boomed and roared a sonorous diapason. The pines on the slopes between threshed and soughed and wailed. And the whole storm sped riotously southward through the narrow throat of the glen, hooting with a thousand horns to have escaped the trees, as if rejoicing to spread itself again over the open country, where it might rage without check or obstacle from horizon to horizon.

Nance looked eagerly down the road, even as the Hoolet had done earlier in the evening at the Ghost's Walk. But with what other hopes and fears! Secure in her lover's devotion, Nance

* A "lane" is, in Galloway, a slow, untrouted, sullen, half-stagnant piece of water, loitering currentless across a meadow or peat-moor.

stamped her little foot, half with a pretty petulant impatience, and half to keep it warm. For Nance was not over-wise in this, that after work-time, she preferred pretty shoes to water-tight, ugly ones, and this, too, in spite of the best professional advice.

The road lay bleak and bare beneath her, but well enough seen in the sifted, uncertain light from the clouds overhead. Nance was about to turn back again. She had, indeed, already hitched her plaid indignantly upon her shoulder, at the same time flinging back the locks that, wind-blown, flickered about her brows, all in one graceful movement. ("My God, may I keep her! for just such gestures and dainty habitudes are the things it would break my heart to remember were she taken from me!")

But all at once, as she watched half turned to depart, something moved across the road beneath, sped swiftly over the sprinkled sleety grey-green of the water-meadow, and plunged into the great black expanse of Drowned Duncan's Pool, with a splash which Nance could distinctly hear above the multiplied ravings of the storm.

Nance stood a moment stilled with fear. It was a superstitious country, that of Galloway, especially in older days. And, praise the pigs, my Nance is as superstitious as every good wom-

an ought to be—and as the others cannot help being in their heart of hearts.

The prodigy might, therefore, have been a ghost, and at the thought Nance kilted her skirts to run. Or even the water-kelpie, and at the thought she started light-foot for the candle in the gable window of Nether Neuk, faintly glimpsed through the trees.

But as she was in act to flee, a single human cry reached her ears—so piercing, so woman-like, that Nance was over the dyke and racing for the black pool before ever she gave herself time to think.

Almost she had rushed into its gloomy depths, for in the grey uncertain light everything looked much farther away than it was in reality.

“O tell me who you are,” cried Nance, peering into the blackness. “Can I help ye? O how can I help ye?”

But there came no voice of reply. The pool slept black from verge to verge, scarce ruffled by the great storm which leaped across it overhead, so deep and sheltered it lay among the pines.

“O speak to me—speak!” cried Nance, running hither and thither on the marshy verge, wringing her hands for fear and very helplessness.

The moon came out somewhere up in the lift, and as the scanty, sifted light struggled through the cloud-rack overhead, a white face swam up, as it had been from the blackest depths of the pool. It was a peaceful face, the eyes closed, the lips a little open as if asleep.

Nance did not hesitate a moment. She could swim, indeed; but that was little useful, for what woman could swim with all her clothes upon her on such a night, or, indeed, at any time in the lily-tangled depths of Drowned Duncan's Pool? She saw, however, that the willows were growing long and supple by the waterside, some of them with their roots in the lane itself. She bent down the lithe, reluctant shoots, and let herself slide fearlessly into the pool, keeping her hand firmly on the pliant tips. Half swimming, half floating, but all the time keeping her eyes on the white face, she managed to seize the woman by the hair. And a minute afterwards, dripping black moss-water from head to foot, Nance dragged herself out upon the bank with a still, quiet body across her breast.

How my lass carried that water-logged burden along the lane-side, through the gates, and up the long loaning to the house door of Nether Neuk no one knows, and Nance Chrystie a little less than any one.

Nevertheless the thing was done. And perhaps after all the simplest explanation is the best: that God, who finds the angels and the butterflies their sufficient wings, gave His messenger, Nance Chrystie, the strength to carry her burden home that night.

Within ten minutes, Nance staggered into the kitchen of Nether Neuk with the unconscious Hoolet in her arms, to the terror of Grace and the Hempie, and more especially to the infinite shrill indignation and dismay of Peter Chrystie, who came stumbling and peering out of the parlour to confront such a spectacle as he had never in his life seen in his sober outer halls—his daughter Nance running black water from head to heel, and supporting in her arms a pale, white-faced form, with closed eyes and long black hair that swept the floor.

“Wha is this, I wad like to ken, that ye are bringing in here?” he cried. “Surely not that runnagate besom, Rab An’erson’s Hoolet, that has made herself the byeword of every clash in the country-side? Ye are fair crazy, Nance Chrystie! She is no’ comin’ into my decent hoose, I tell ye plainly, dreepin’ on my guid carpets that cost sae muckle hard-earned siller! Tak’ her oot to the barn. There’s a tramp’s bed there for siclike folk, very decent and comfortable. She’s

no comin' in here, I tell ye. D'ye hear me? I will be obeyed!"

His voice rose to a shrill scream of anger, and the retainers shrank before it. Even the Hempie trembled, and his poor wife betook herself to the back premises to be out of the way of the coming fury.

"Aye, take her there! For ony sake dinna anger my faither," said Grace, ever zealous for the easier course.

Nance stood with her burden on her arms, as if the well-grown girl had been but a feather. I declare I could not have done it myself. And they say that she seemed a foot higher of her stature. She gave Grace just one glance of contempt, and strode forward. She fairly towered above her father, who stood shaking his clenched fists before her in the doorway.

"Out of my road, man," she cried to him; "meddle not with me this night, I warn you, on your peril, sir!"

And she advanced so suddenly and so fiercely towards the parlour door in which Peter stood on the defensive, that her father actually retreated in shrill trepidation, leaving the way clear.

Nance swept past him with the Hoolet still in her arms, flashing through the parlour where sat the astonished laird of Butterhole, storm-

stayed for the night, and counting himself wondrous comfortable with a reeking tumbler at his elbow.

Then in the sacred "spare-room" itself—the best bedroom of Nether Neuk, she laid her burden down on the sofa.

The Hoolet had not been long in the water, only a minute or two—"she cannot be dead," Nance said to those who had followed her, bewildered. "Here, Hempie, put on a fire. Clemmy Kirkpatrick, come you and help me to restore her breathing."

And in a moment she had the fire lit, the Hempie despatched to bring a supply of hot bottles and bricks, and she herself was instructing Clemmy Kirkpatrick in the modes of restoring artificial breathing, as cleverly as if the diploma had been her own. First they turned the poor Hoolet on her face to let the water drip out of the air-passages of the nostrils and mouth. Then she was replaced on her back to enable Clemmy and Nance to raise the arms above her head, and again depress them to compel the air to fill the cavity of the chest.

The Hoolet had, indeed, not been long in the water, thanks to the bravery and promptitude of Nance, so that after a little while of hard and anxious work, she gave a long sigh, and opened

her eyes upon the world she had thought to quit for ever.

"I couldna win to him in time," she said, and slipped back into unconsciousness.

Then it was that, for the first time, Nance became conscious of her father's vehement reproaches, which had been proceeding in a steady stream from the door at which he stood, shaking his fist in impotent anger.

"I disown ye, impudent besom!" he cried, "bringing an infamous woman to my decent house. I bid ye tak' her oot. I am master here, and that ye shall ken. I command ye!"

It was no time for over-niceity in regard to the observation of the fifth commandment. So what particular command Peter Chrystie laid upon his eldest daughter will probably never be known. For the impetuous young woman advanced like a whirlwind to the door at which he stood fulminating. She promptly seized her father by the arm and ran him through the parlour. The rapid passage of father and daughter was so alarming to the Laird of Butterhole, that he exclaimed "Lord save us! What's this! What's this!" and collapsed on the floor, where he groped vainly in his pockets for a snuff-box in order to collect his senses. Before she stayed the impetuosity of her charge, Nance had her father

safe in his bedroom upstairs, where a fire had already been made for him.

"Now, bide ye there and say your says at your leisure, faither," she exclaimed; "I'll bring ye your supper mysel'!"

Peter Chrystie was too astonished even to swear at his daughter as she went down the stairs, but after a little he shook the door and shouted till the plaster began to flake off the ceiling. Nevertheless, the hinges held, and the key was safe in Nance's pocket.

The Hoolet was soon in bed under warm blankets, and when at last I arrived, having been intercepted at the loaning-end by a ploughman who knew of my passing, there was little for me to do, except to congratulate the heroine.

"O Nance, Nance," I said, "was there ever a lass like you? You are the bravest——"

"Dinna speak to me, Alec—I canna bear it!" she said, beginning to sob with the reaction.

"It is all right, Nance; there is nothing to greet about!"

"I'm no greetin'—at ony rate, I suppose I may greet if I like without askin' your leave!"

And with these defiant words our brave maid subsided on a stool, and began to weep into her hands till the tears ran through her fingers. Then quite as suddenly she began to laugh.

"See!" she cried, "ye have one o' your socks on inside oot, Alec. Is that no' silly?"

And she laughed on about the stocking till I liked it far less than the crying.

But presently she grew quieter, dried her face, and went in to take a look at the patient, who was now sleeping peacefully.

"I maun tak' my faither his supper," said Nance. And in a few minutes, with Clemmy Kirkpatrick carrying the tray, and the Hempie in the rear to guard the door, the forces of organised rebellion proceeded upstairs to Peter's room.

The noise when the door was opened could be heard across the yard, but the doughty Peter contented himself with words. At first he refused all compromise. He would turn every one of them out of doors that instant. He threw an empty plate at Nance, which the Hempie caught as deftly as if it had been a cap at "steal-the-bonnets."

"Make yourself perfectly easy, faither," said Nance soothingly. "Dr. M'Quhirr is paying the patient every attention."

"Dr. M'Deevil!" shouted Peter, dancing about on his tiptoes with his hands above his head. "How dare he come into my house?—'Doctor' indeed—I'll 'doctor' him. What fetched him here, I wad like to ken?"

“Tam Murchison met him on the road and brought him up,” answered Nance demurely.

I grieve to say that the possession of a duly qualified professional man on the premises had not the effect of easing the mind of the master of Nether Neuk. Nor is it requisite to state the depths of perdition to which all my house, and all the M'Quhirrs to unborn generations, were forthwith consigned.

“Aweel, a guid nicht's rest to ye, faither!” were the last words of his dutiful daughter, as she went out and locked the door upon him. “If ye want me, just rap doon wi' your stick. The Hempie and me and the Doctor will be sittin' up wi' the patient in the best bedroom just below ye. We will no be sleeping.”

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE FISCAL'S EXAMINATION.

However, on the morrow, I committed the case to Dr. Armstrong, not only because my presence caused friction in the Nether Neuk household, but also because a still graver case occupied all my time, and, indeed, the attention of the whole parish. I got the first news as I drove leisurely down the loaning from the farm in the morning.

Nathan Murdoch, so Tam Murchison said, had been found at the upper end of the Lang Wood, murdered; and the police from Cairn Edward were already seeking Rab Anderson.

The ill news was soon carried to Peter Chrystie, who had found his room unlocked in the morning. He was, as may be supposed, neither to hold nor to bind. He would have marched straight into the "best room" in which the poor Hoolet was bestowed, still sleeping quietly from the draught I had given her. Luckily, however,

Nance was there in attendance on Dr. Armstrong. Intercepting her father in the passage, she wheeled him about promptly, and sent him to mumble out his indignations and griefs in the parlour, where the bemused and bewildered laird of Butterhole kept him company, doubtless congratulating himself that he had not committed himself to the tender mercies of such a whirlwind as Nance Chrystie.

Then, as Dr. Armstrong went out, that sturdy and fearless autocrat, for thirty years the tyrant of all that concerned health and life in the parish of Whinnyliggate, gave Peter the historical "dressing" of which the ploughmen and servant lassies still talk.

"Nance was grand!" they said afterwards, discussing the whole subject, "but then she said little and the fun was sune ower. She juist ran the auld wretch through the hoose like a man wheelin' peats in a barrow, and dumped him doon wi' a clash in his ain bedroom. Then the door was lockit as quick as wink, an' a' that ye heard after that was juist the birr o' an oath at odd whiles—refreshin', but no' exactly satisfyin'. It only made ye wish for mair! But Lord! the Doctor—he juist fairly garred the auld man's flesh creep on his banes wi' his lang-nebbit words."

The doctor's famous polysyllables need not

occupy us in this place, though I have them by heart and should like nothing better than to repeat them.

The substance of his speech was, that if Peter interfered by word or deed, with his (Dr. Armstrong's) patient, lying then in the best room of Nether Neuk—nay, if he so much as set foot within the passage or let the sound of his voice reach her for harm—he would instantly jail the evil-doer, and have him tried for manslaughter, if not for MURDER!

The doctor rolled out his climax with a rasp on the r-r-rs of the last word, like a well-driven saw meeting a nail in the log.

Peter quailed before him, and his eyes, in spite of himself, sought the floor.

“Now mind,” said the doctor, shaking his finger solemnly at his enemy, “I am warning ye. You have heard what I did to Joe M'Cormick in Little Dublin when he interfered with his mother, when the auld besom was a patient of mine. Joe persisted in entering the apartment when his mother was in a state of *coma*—his loud talk aroused the patient, complications were introduced, and the patient died. *I got Joe seven years!*”

And the doctor stalked out a victor. He did not mention that Joe had assaulted his mother

as she lay helpless on her bed with a three-legged stool, and that the seven years' penal servitude might possibly have as much to do with that as with interfering with Dr. Armstrong's patient.

But none dared contradict what had been repeated so often, that it was held for Gospel truth by the whole country-side, and at last had come to be fully believed by its original author.

After this harangue, the cowed tyrant of Nether Neuk crept cautiously to the bedroom door every morning and called his wife, who waited upon the Hoolet in the absence of Nance. The emancipated Clemmy Kirkpatrick would come with finger on lip and speak with her husband in the gate.

Then, with a string of oaths rumbling under his breath, he would say cautiously, "Hoo is she, the blastie, the besom, the shameless Turk? She's no in a state of comey, is she?"

"Na," his wife would reply, "she's sleepin'."

"That's a guid thing, at ony rate," says Peter, shaking his head, "for if I were to put her into a state o' comey, yon doctor brute said he wad get me seven year like Joe M'Cormick!"

Then Peter would walk away, satisfied that at least he was safe so far, but taking revenge upon all concerned with his humiliation in a steady pour of imprecations of the most varied kind, all

carefully modulated with a view to avoiding the threatened seven years, and hissed between his teeth rather than spoken—"O, the feckless ill-conditioned randy, the guid-for-naething slut——"

The senseless body of Nathan Murdoch had been found in the morning at the head end of the Lang Wood of Larbrax, and near it, a thick black-thorn cudgel broken short off a foot from the head, which had evidently been used in causing the terrible wounds on the head of the victim.

The wounded man had been carried, apparently in a dying state, to my father's house of Drumquhat, and was, therefore, now in the best hands. I had been at once sent for from Nether Neuk, Dr. Armstrong not yet having arrived from Cairn Edward.

At first I was inclined to despair of the case. For there was not only a severe contused cut behind the ear, but also a deep and severe wound, with well-marked depression, just above the left temple. Added to this there were the ordinary symptoms of severe compression of the brain.

When Dr. Armstrong saw the wounds, he patted me on the shoulder and bade me take heart. "With the head," he said, "you never can tell. It never does to mislippen the scart o' a pin on the thickest skull, nor yet to despond

about a crack ye nicht put your finger in. Mony a body has leaved lang and lang wi' a crack i' their heads. Ye wadna doot that, Alec, gin ye kened this parish as well as I do, laddie!"

I found my worthy mother wonderfully calm under the severe trial of finding her serene home suddenly invaded by a wounded and unconscious stranger, and one so generally undesirable. Also, as soon as she knew all, she had her usual quick revulsions of feeling.

"Puir lassie!" she would say; "puir, puir lassie! And ye say the vagabond deceived her—pretended to mairry her and then—O the wretch, I wadna do a thing to save him frae the Black Hole! Alec, I believe it's time the puir craitur had his draps!"

Then, as she was opening the clenched teeth characteristic of such cases, with a silver fork (which was never again seen in family history), I could hear her muttering to herself, "Lord forgie me! it's no for your sake, ye black deceiver! It's to keep that puir, misguided lad, Rab Anderson, frae the gallows—I wonder what cauld, dreepin' moss-hag he is hidin' in this nicht?"

Many more wondered that besides my mother. The police were said to be close on the trail. As usual, they had not caught the criminal, but there were clews galore. The authorities were sending

down a special detective from Edinburgh. The capture of the miscreant was imminent. Nevertheless, in spite of such determined displays of energy, Rab remained at liberty.

By special command, I went over to Nether Neuk to see my first patient. Nance was waiting for me at the corner, as I threw Mary Grey's rein over the gatepost.

"No," said my lass, without informing me what unspoken statement of mine she denied; "come this way, quietly—not like a bullock, man!"

I followed her into the cheese-room, a pleasantly scented apartment, bare, dry, and airy, with large cheeses in rows all round, laid upon a framework set a few feet from the wall. Two long frames extended all the way along the sides of the room, and at the top, between two deep windows, there was a smaller press, also filled with the great, mellow, round discs.

"Take out these three!" commanded Nance, "lay them on the floor. Now look in!"

I stooped obediently, and there, staring out of the space between the shelves, was the shock head of Robert Anderson, malefactor!

A solemn conclave was assembled in the parlour of Nether Neuk. The Fiscal, all important

Scottish legal functionary—public prosecutor, coroner, counsel for the crown, shrewd and kindly gentleman all in one, was seated precognosing evidence. He had before him a pen, a blotter, an ink-stand, many sheets of paper—and a glass of whisky.

“And now, Doctor McQuhrr (Alexander, Junior, M. B., C. M., Edinburgh), tell us what you know of this matter.”

The Fiscal, Mr. Stephen Williamson, rubbed his forefinger officially through his scant legal side-whisker, and tapped the paper before him with the blunt end of his pencil. There was a shrewd omniscient look in his short-sighted eyes of china blue, and in his nod especially an expression of assured and invincible fore-knowledge which seemed to say, “I know all that you know, and more. I am intimately acquainted with all you are going to say. But, nevertheless, for form’s sake, you had better get along and say it.”

At the first glance I was quite sure that Mr. Stephen Williamson must be acquainted with the secret of the cheese-room.

“Tell us all that you know about the matter,” he said, nodding as before.

Thus encouraged, I entered into minute particulars about the finding of the body. I described the wounds on the temple and cerebellum.

I told him of sutures and trepanning, venous sinuses, and cephalic compressions, while Dr. Armstrong stood in the doorway and smiled compassionately.

"Was a' that correct?" he asked me privately afterwards.

I assured him that it was, to the best of my knowledge and belief.

"Aweel," he replied with a sigh, "as the dried-up lawyer body was taking it doon in black and white, maybe it was as weel. But ordinary-wise, it doesna do to cocker them up wi' ower muckle o' the exact sciences."

CHAPTER XXVII.

ENTER RAB AN'ERSON.

Meanwhile, the fiscal was summing up apparently for his own benefit, really for ours.

“The evidence,” he said, “against the criminal is singularly complete. Indeed, the case may be called a beautifully rounded one. There is the victim, not yet dead, but in a state of *coma*——”

“Lord, lord! is it come to that! It's a' up wi' Rab An'erson then!” cried Peter Chrystie, holding up his hands; “and they telled me he was sleepin' sound!”

“Then there is the motive—revenge on the reputed seducer of his daughter, who, that same night, endeavoured to drown herself, and was only rescued by the courage and determination of one of our fairest and noblest young——”

The fiscal, who was distinctly a man of taste, looked about for Nance, but it was her father's rasping voice which broke in upon the excessively illegal adjectives.

"O the randy, the blake, the shameless besom," said Peter Chrystie, in a perfectly audible aside, "bringin' the shameless woman to my decent hoose! What for couldna she hae left the jade to droon hersel' in Duncan's Pool if she liked?"

"Have you anything more to tell us, doctor?"

I hesitated. There was one thing more—indeed two. I was prevented from telling the whole truth, for the mystery of the cheese-room must be kept. But at least I might reveal the secret of the over-heard tryst, under cloud of night, in the grassy loop of the Wood of Larbrax.

Yet it was a difficult thing to tell, for it involved Nance and the Hempie as well as myself. Nevertheless, for the sake of the poor Hoolet, I did not hesitate.

"We were in the Lang Wood one evening, about a year ago—I can tell you the exact date by reference to a pocket-book which is at Dr. Armstrong's house in Cairn-Edward."

"And who are the 'we' of whom you speak—Dr. Armstrong and yourself?" queried the fiscal, pausing to note my evidence.

"No," said I, hesitating; "in fact it was Miss Nance Chrystie and——"

The fiscal cleared his throat meaningly, and drew his chair up closer to the table. The case was developing. "And yourself, I presume," he said.

"Miss Chrystie, Miss Elizabeth Chrystie and myself!" I corrected, with dignity.

"I see. I beg your pardon, Doctor, a scientific expedition to the Lang Wood of Larbrax—in the evening, I think you said?" slowly repeated the fiscal, noting down the facts.

"And Miss Elizabeth Chrystie, I think you said?" he went on.

"Elizabeth Jane—O wait till I get the monkey, the treacherous besom, the leein', upsettin' blastie!" Peter Chrystie's ceaseless subterranean growl rose momentarily to the surface in order to make a correction in the name of his youngest daughter.

"So, Doctor, the three of you, Miss Chrystie, Miss Elizabeth Jane (am I correct?), and yourself took an evening walk on the *blank* of *blank*, last year to the Lang Wood of Larbrax. And what did you hear or see there, bearing upon the case now before us?"

"We saw two people meet. We heard them talk. We heard the man make a sham declaration of marriage with the woman——"

“ Their names, supposing that you recognised them clearly——”

“ They were Nathan Murdoch and 'Lizbeth Anderson, commonly called the Hoolet!” interrupted Nance from the doorway of the passage which led to the Hoolet's room.

The fiscal bowed towards her in a deprecating way, which at once thanked her for the information, and insinuated that at present someone else was under examination.

“ Describe the meeting exactly!” he said, “ it may furnish important evidence as to motive!”

I did so amid breathless silence. When I came to the mutual declaration of marriage, the fiscal raised his head quickly and cocked it a little to one side, like a terrier at a rat-hole.

“ Say that again, very exactly, if you please—repeat the exact words of the promises!”

I did so.

“ I TAKE THEE TO BE MY WEDDED WIFE;
AND I PROMISE TO BE UNTO THEE A FAITHFUL
AND LOVING HUSBAND TILL DEATH US DO PART!”

“ You are sure that you heard Nathan Murdoch say that?”

“ I did, on my oath.”

“ And the woman, Elizabeth Anderson, you heard her make a similar declaration?”

The fiscal was on his feet now in his excitement.

"Certainly, and Nance and the Hempie heard her also!"

"Then," said the fiscal solemnly, striking his fist sonorously on the table, "I tell you that these two are as well and soundly married as they can be under the Law of Scotland!"

"What!" cried Peter Chrystie; "ye say that the besom is a married wife—and the bairn—impossible, perfect nonsense, fiscal! Nathan Murdoch wad never hae been sic a fool. It was done in inadvertence, I tell you. He micht hae said it to deceive the craitur, but surely—where are the witnesses——?"

"Here!" said the Hempie, standing up beside me.

"Here!" cried Nance, appearing in the doorway with an infant in her arms.

"Tak' away the child o' shame!" cried Peter, "away wi' the brat oot o' my sicht!"

The fiscal looked at him sternly.

"Silence, sir!" he said, "your observations are wholly irrelevant. The witnesses, let me tell you, are perfectly admissible in law, though both parties were unaware of their presence. The marriage, made by declaration in the presence of

three reputable witnesses, is as good as your own—or even mine.”

He added the latter clause with something like a sigh. He had reasons for wishing that there had been some flaw in the last mentioned.

“ I repeat it,” he said, “ the marriage is doubtless entirely legal——”

The outer door of Nether Neuk burst open and clashed against the wall. A man, haggard and worn with watching, stained with the peat of the moors and with the grey clay of burn-sides, stood before us, towering like a gaunt giant, almost to the blackened joists of the old farmhouse.

It was the accused man himself, Robert Anderson!”

“ Say that again, fiscal,” he cried, in a voice hoarse with anxiety.

The man of law, startled out of his official dignity by the sudden apparition, did as he was bid.

“ And the bairn!” cried Rab with eagerness in his voice, “ I heard it greet.”

“ The child is perfectly legitimate,” answered the fiscal.

“ Then I have killed an innocent man,” cried Rab Anderson; “ take me away to gaol.”

And he came forward to the fiscal with his wrists close together, waiting for the handcuffs.

The fiscal was entirely nonplussed. He had come out to precognosce evidence, not to apprehend the criminal—which, indeed, was not his business.

“I—I will communicate with the chief constable,” he said, falteringly.

But before fiscal or anyone else could come to their senses and decide what to do in these unforeseen circumstances, Nance, with the baby still in her arms, darted across the parlour to where Rab Anderson was standing with his wrists still stretched out. She took him by the shoulder with her unoccupied hand, and hustled him into the kitchen.

I followed as quickly as I could. Nance had Rab against the dresser, and was at once shaking him, protecting the babe, and haranguing the bewildered giant.

“Ye daft loon,” she was saying, “what garred ye leave the cheese room?—How dared ye when I forbade ye?”

Rab stared vaguely, but made no reply.

“And what now?” she cried. “What do you propose to do, after a’ my care o’ ye, ye shameless and ungratefu’ blackguard?”

"I am gaun to the gaol at Kirkcudbright," said Rab sullenly.

"Aye," said Nance, "ye will, will ye? We'll see aboot that. Through the door wi' ye the noo, my man, and we'll speak aboot that afterwards. Into the Wood o' Larbrax wi' ye as fast as ye can foot it! D'ye think Nance Chrystie will let ye disgrace your daughter that is a wedded wife, or let this bonnie wee man be obliged to own that his ain grandfather was hanged on the black gallows' tree?"

She held the outer door open with one hand. The babe smiled up in the criminal's face. She pointed to the pines along the hillside.

"Away wi' ye!" she commanded.

The fiscal appeared at the door. Rab was already half-way to the march-dyke.

"Stop him! Seize him! In the name of the Law!" cried the fiscal in his most official voice, but with mighty little conviction in his tone.

And I think the worthy man winked to himself privately, for he had been so long gathering his papers that the criminal had an excellent start.

"Take him, in the name of the Law!" he cried again with additional energy, when he had made sure that no one was following.

The serving-men shook their heads.

“I daresay,” said Davit Walkinshaw. “Let the Law do its ain jobs at catchin’ Rab An’erson in the Lang Wood o’ Larbrax. I’m gaun to look the sheep. That’s what I’m paid for!”

And then the fiscal went back to the parlour not ill content, and smiled at Nance, who made him a dish of tea.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MISTRESS BRIDGET MACCORMICK.

Four days afterwards I was again at Nether Neuk. I do not mean that I had been absent from the purlieus of the farm for three entire days. I was, indeed, compelled to pass it every day in the way of duty, on my way to see the wounded man at Drumquhat. He still lay unconscious, for though since the successful raising of the depressed portion of the injured skull the worst symptoms had disappeared, Nathan Murdoch was far from being out of danger, and still remained perfectly unconscious of his surroundings, as well as ignorant of the new dignities of husband and father which the fiscal had declared to be indubitably his by the law of the land.

But on this fourth day I was officially present at Nether Neuk in my capacity of assistant (and proximate partner) to Dr. Armstrong.

Upon my departure, Nance accompanied me to the gate at the foot of the loaning.

"Alec," she said, putting her hand at once coaxingly and commandingly on my arm, "I want you to meet me here, and to bring me as many certificates of good conduct and character in favour of one Daniel MacCormick, an Irish harvestman, as you have time to write—as well as his discharge from any hospital you please, and for any disease you have no particular ill-will against."

"What mad prank is this, Nance?" cried I, aghast; "ye want me to commit forgery?"

"Any way of it you please," cried our pretty Mistress Whirlwind, "but be here at seven o'clock to-morrow morning with the letters—or never dare speak to Nance Chrystie again!"

And with that she disappeared among the beech trees, and all I saw of her was no more than the flash of her light gown as she whisked over the stile into the orchard, standing a moment a-tiptoe on the topmost stone to blow me a kiss from her finger tips.

I did make it convenient to be passing the road-end of Nether Neuk about the appointed hour in the morning, as much to the indignation of Mary Grey as to the astonishment of Dr. Armstrong, who asked me if I had discovered inflammatory symptoms of the cephalic cavity, complicated by any tendency to hemiplegic

paralysis on the suture opposite to the seat of injury.

I said "No."

It was another patient I was going to see, whose name I could not for the moment condescend upon.

When I arrived at the foot of the loaning of Nether Neuk, I stopped Mary Grey. I looked all about for Nance, but the fields and the loaning were vague and silent. I stopped, and presently through the clear, diffused air of morning I heard a voice call my name. It came from the edge of the outlier of spruce, which the Lang Wood threw across the road at the edge of Drowned Duncan's Pool.

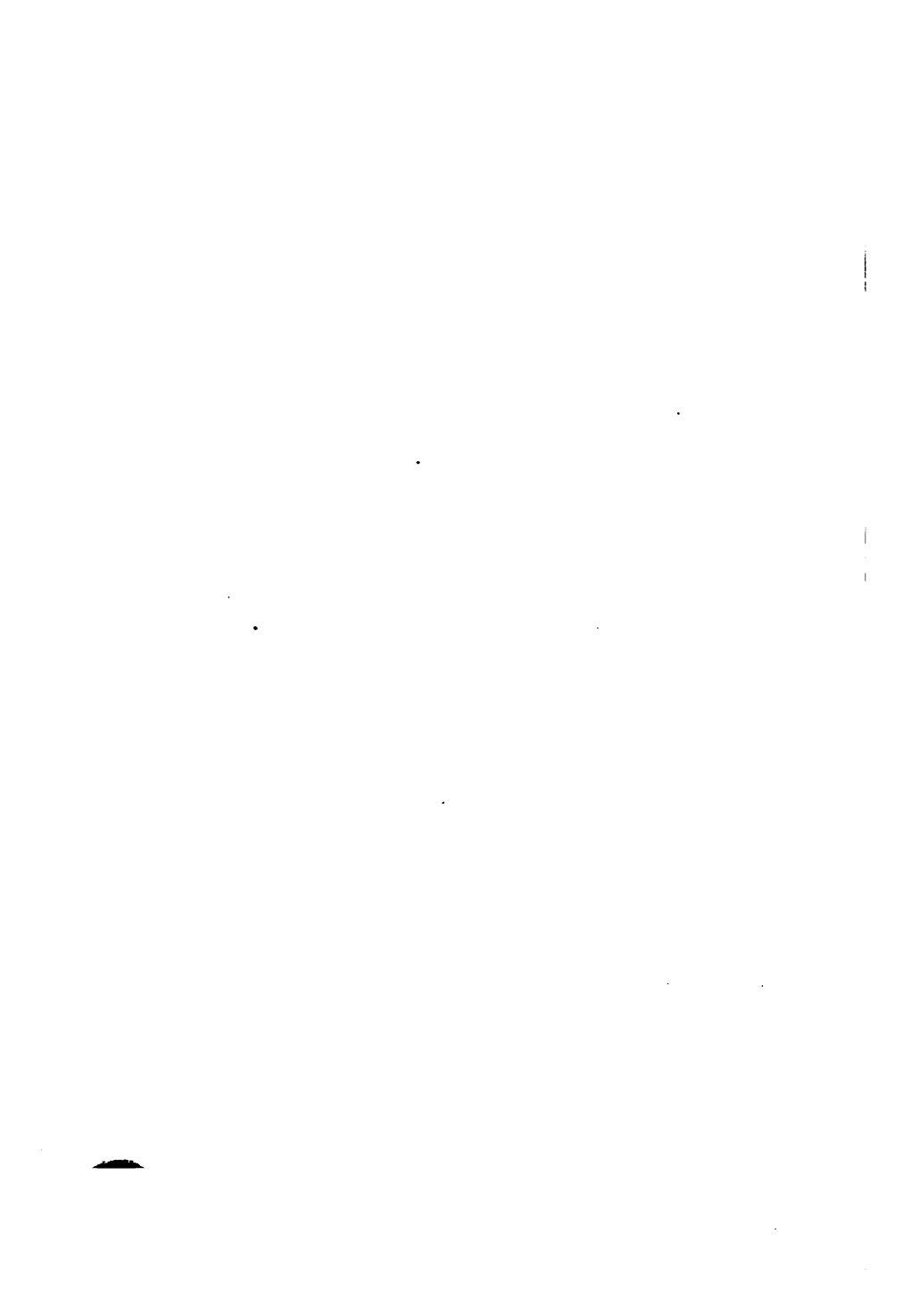
I hitched up Mary Grey's reluctant head from the esculent grass of the roadside, and urged her on till the gig and I were well within the belt of trees.

Then immediately from over the dyke above me appeared two heads, neither of which at the first glance I was able to recognise. The next moment—"Nance!" I exclaimed in a horrified tone.

For Nance it was, her abundant hair tucked up in a loose net like that of the Irish women who accompany their husbands and fathers over to the harvesting in the autumn. Her usually so



Mistress Bridget MacCormick.



fascinatingly tangled curls were combed straight on either side of her face, hiding her ears. She wore no bonnet, but a red handkerchief was tied coquettishly about her head. A short skirted gown of coarse frieze came a little below her knee, beneath which a shapely pair of legs in rig-and-fur stockings of quaint pattern were thrust into a worn pair of West country brogans. On a dainty sprig of blackthorn over her shoulder she carried a bundle done up in a blue-spotted handkerchief.

Her companion, whose height alone allowed me to recognise him as Rab Anderson, was attired like an Irish harvestman, in rough mole-skins, cross-gartered round the legs with straw ropes. His feet were thrust into a pair of enormous clogs, with "cakars" or iron shods on their wooden soles.

He carried the blade of a scythe under one arm, done up carefully in brown paper.

"The top o' the marnin' to ye, dochtor!" cried Nance joyously, curtseying to me in an exaggerated Irish manner.

I stared aghast. What impudent cantrip had the witch in her mind now?

"And shure thin, is it that ye have lost your tongue entirely? Can't ye even rowl the illegant speech out o' your mouth like syrup from a

copper spigot, and pass the time o' day wid a purty colleen?"

She continued to speak in the same outrageously Hibernian accent so that, though the serious aspect of the business appealed strong to me, I could not forbear from smiling at her mad humour.

"Pass over thim papers, driver!" she commanded, holding out her hand.

I passed the bundle down, for by this time both Rab and she stood on the road.

"Right and commodious as a crack on the head from a dandy twig av shillaleh on the road to Donnybrook!" the daft thing cried, as she glanced over the papers.

Then the madcap launched into gay song, twirling her blackthorn round in her fingers, and dancing a light-heeled jig to her own singing:

"Dan MacCormick took a shtick,

And made a whack at Doogan!"

"*What—little Johnny Doogan?*"

"Yus—he shwore he'd have his loife!"

"*And what did Doogan do to him?*"

"He said he'd been unthru to him!"

"*Did Doogan owe him money?*"

"Naw—he shtole MacCormick's woife!"*

Nance concluded this interesting dramatic recital with an outrageous breakdown, executed

* From a transatlantic emigrant ditty, very racy in the original.

with her head on one side, her sprig of shillaleh beneath her arm, and her hands on her waist at either side. Then she stopped all suddenly, curtsying low, and blew me a dainty kiss.

But I was both pained and horrified, for was not I a doctor, fully qualified, and of quite intense respectability? How could I approve of such levity in the girl I was about to marry.

“What is the meaning of all this farce?” I asked sternly.

“Och, farce is it?” she said, never dropping for a moment her outrageous Irishry (where she learned such things I know not). “Dear Doctor McQuhirr, raily in your heart, ye know, ye think it mighty purty. You wad think it swater than honey in the comb to climb down here and give me a kiss!”

I disdained an answer.

Even the disguised Rab Anderson smiled.

“And look ye, this is me brother Dan, that I’ve been tellin’ ye av,” she said, dropping a curtsy, “and I am me own brother Dan’s wan sister Bridget, at your honour’s sarvice, and a good-lookin’ single woman Bridget is. If ye please, we are on our road from hospital—fhah hospital is it, at all at all?” she affected to consult my forged papers (to furnish which, it goes without saying, I had risked my position in the profession). “O,

in the Southern Counties Hospital it was! I misremember them Saxon names—they're the devil an' all—and Dan an' me are on our way to Stranraer where there is an immigrating ship for America to put in the day aafter to-morow."

*"For I'm bound for O-hi-O
Where the happy Mickies go,
And the swate potatoes grow!—
There I'll aise the blisssed Red-skins,
Of their scalps and ugly head-skins,
On the banks of Mississippi and the river O-hi-O."*

"Nance," I protested, "be sensible—this is a serious matter——"

"Sairious, is it?" she cried, stopping her shillelah in mid-twirl, "be the powers, Docthor Sandy McQuhirr, you sittin' there like me lord Tim Flannigan in a mud-kyart, can't tell half how sairious it is! But good-day to ye, Docthor dear," she cried, waving her hand and turning back again towards the wood.

Rab stepped down and wrung my hand without words, but with an eye that looked straight up at me. Then he also turned and vanished among the birch copses. I have never seen him since.

But up from the depths of the wood, as I sat in the gig and listened, came the strains of a gay voice.

*"Don't forget poor Biddy Cormick in the lands beyond the say,
Don't forget your Bridget, darlint', when you dhrink your
cup av tay—*

Pray remember colleen Bridget in the mornin'!"

I did not laugh, as the last line came through the birches merry as a quickstep. The water stood in my eyes instead. I could not help it as I thought of the gallant girlish heart that carried all other people's troubles as her natural right, and met the brunt of the darkest day with a gay flout and a merry stave. Sweet, brave, humble, reckless, unassuming, gracious, madcap Nance, was there ever a maid like you since the world began?

"God forgive me, darling," I said to Mary Gray as I lifted the reins with a heavy heart, "I'm not worthy of such a lass. You are ten times the man I am or ever will be, Nance Christie!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE HEMPIE ARRANGES NANCE'S DOWRY.

When next I saw Nance it was some ten days later. She was coming as demurely as usual out of the Kirk of Whinnyliggate, and she said she had enjoyed the sermon. I tried her with a bit of choice Hibernian, as soon as we were clear of the black-coated throng and the ears of the gossips.

Nance looked blank.

"I do not understand your high London English!" she said, calmly raising a pair of beautifully clear and candid eyes to mine. "It will be associating with these fine folk about Cairn Edward that learns ye to clip your words that gait! Think shame, man, Alec!"

But after all, the main thing was that Rab Anderson was safe at sea on his way to a new world.

Nathan Murdoch slowly recovered his health of body under my mother's care. But in spite of

the operation which Dr. Armstrong had performed with so great skill, he continued to suffer from complete loss of memory and general weakness.

So soon as the Hoolet was well enough she insisted on going to take care of him. To me the task was allotted of informing her that she was a legally married woman, and that by the law of the land, Nathan Murdoch was her wedded husband. I expected either a burst of gratitude, or a storm of indignant unbelief. I thought the chances were about equal. I was prepared for either, but I was not prepared for what the Hoolet did say. It was no more than this—

“ And do you think, Alec, that I ever doubted it, or him? ”

The fiscal interested himself in the case, and in time obtained powers to settle the estate of Nathan Murdoch, lately outfitter and general draper, of Bolton-le-Moors, Preston, and Chorley. He gave the job to Peter Chrystie as his “ doer,” for Peter’s prejudices had all been overcome so soon as he found that the Hoolet was a well-to-do, decent, respectable woman, whose husband had siller in the bank. He “ aye thoct,” so he said, “ that ’Lizabeth was the best of the bunch. As for Rab Anderson, Lazy Taed——!”

When Peter returned from England with his

very satisfactory financial results, and a new store of personal experiences, the Hoolet settled with her "man," in a small cottage above the village of Whinnyliggate. Nathan Murdoch was "a heavy handling" as the people said. But 'Lizabeth Murdoch asked help from none, but dwelt alone up there with her husband and her child.

Nance and I were married in the spring, and I succeeded to Dr. Armstrong's practice. Peter did well by us, much against his will. But the Hempie was more practical than either of us. I may tell in a word how the matter of Nance's dowry came about—by the Hempie's means, as usual, all the more that I have told so much of that lively lady's recklessness.

It was a gloomy day in the wet, bleak winter before our wedding, and the Hempie and her father were walking homeward over the moor from Cairn Edward. Little planks had been placed here and there across the worst and deepest of the moss-hags.

Upon the way the Hempie had broached the subject dearest to Nance's heart and mine, and now, like the best of sisters, she was enlarging upon our prospects and my success. The practice was completely paid for. My father was going to furnish the house for the "young folk," and it surely behoved the eldest daughter of

Peter Chrystie of Nether Neuk to go from her father's house, at least well provided for, if not handsomely tochered as well.

The farmer was just on the point of setting a careful foot upon the rough plank which afforded a perilous passage over the depths of the Muckle Flowe, the widest quagmire on the moor. But as his youngest daughter's arguments and appeals financial reached his ear, he turned about and shook a threatening finger at the daring minx.

"Noo, Hempie," he said, knitting his brow, "listen to me. Ye may juist as weel mak' up your mind sune as syne. You and Nance hae played it gye an' croose lately. Ye hae held your heids most mighty pridefu' this last half year. And Peter Chrystie's no the man to forget it, though I ken weel I hae mysel' to thank for no haudin' ye baith in check better when ye were younger."

"I wad hae admired to hae seen ye try it on our Nance, faither!" cried the irrepressible Hempie, patting her father indulgently on the shoulder. "It wad tak' an abler-bodied man than you, my lad!"

"That wonderfu' Alec o' hers, I'se warrant!" muttered her father grimly.

"Him!" cried the valiant sister, with an ac-

cent of inimitable scorn (I can well believe it), "*him!*—Alec M'Quhirr—maister oor Nancel Certes, he kens better than to make the first offer. But what are ye gaun to gie them for a tocher, faither? A thoosand pounds?"

"A thoosand deevils—the lassie's fair gane gyte! * Where hae I a thoosand pounds? I tell ye no ae penny will I gie them. No, nor the quarter o't—nayther plack nor bodle will ony M'Quhirr o' Drumquhat ever touch of my siller. Do ye no mind that I made a vow, and that vow I shall keep!"

"Deed, faither," said the Hempie gravely, "gin that's a' the difficulty it's easy settled. Ye can gie Nance the thoosand pounds, and keep your oath too. I'll warrant ye o' this, an' sure as she is her faither's dochter, Nance'll keep the purse for the hoose. And Alec shall never finger a penny o' your thoosand pounds—no, nor muckle o' his ain, either!"

Her father obviously melted, for his daughters were certainly proving themselves capable of the qualities he had openly admired all his life—business capacity, arrogance, keenness in bargaining, quickness of plain, everyday, cut-and-thrust wit. But the thought of parting with so great a sum as a thousand pounds was gall and wormwood

* Mad—not to be trusted alone.

to him. He turned about, crying as before, "Ye may beg till ye are hoarse. No a penny will ye get for Alec or her either—no a single copper penny. Lay ye to that, my lass, unless Nance will be biddable and marry the laird of Butterhole after a'!"

As Peter was turning him slowly about in the sticky moss it is to be feared that the Hempie stooped and deftly pulled the plank which crossed the Muckle Flowe an inch or two nearer to her, so that its farther end was resting precariously on the extreme brink of the bank opposite, and was held in place entirely by the foot of Peter's dutiful youngest daughter, Elizabeth Jane Chrystie. There is no evidence for this, however, and it is indeed persistently denied by the person most concerned.

Peter stepped boldly on growling, "No a brass fardin', I tell ye——"

It could not be called a splash. Liquid peat does not splash any more than treacle. But at all events the plank had given way, the Hempie was standing demurely aside, and there was Peter wallowing mid-thigh in the lairy depths of the Muckle Flowe.

"O faither!" she cried, clasping her hands, "could ye no hae ta'en mair care, workin' yoursel' into your tantrums like that——!"

“ Help me oot, Elizabeth Jane, this instant, ye misleared monkey, standing' there. Your sister was clever eneuch at savin' daft limmers, now do you save your ain flesh and blood! ”

“ I think ye said a thoosand pounds, faither! ”

“ I said nocht o' the kind—help me oot, ungratefu' besom! No a penny will Nance get frae me! ”

“ I'm sair doubtfu' that I canna get near ye, faither! I feared o' lairin' in the moss mysel'—and me to be a bridesmaid sune. That wad be a terrible loss to Nance and Alec——”

“ Will ye murder your ain faither, ye unnatural lassie? Saw I ever sic a randy! Help me oot this minute—do ye hear—this very minute! ”

“ I'll rin doon to the farm and send the men up wi' pleuch-chains and cairt rapes. I think they could be here before ye gaed oot o' sicht a'thegither. An' even if no, ye could keep haudin' up your hand abune your heid, and they could aye see where ye were. It wad be a grand guide in howkin' ye oot! ”

“ Lassie, there's my stave! ” cried Peter, beginning to get really anxious, “ tak' haud o' the end and lean far back on the plank. See if ye canna reach it ower to me. ”

“ Ye'll gie Nance the thoosand pound, then! ”



"I'm sair doubtfu' that I canna get near ye, faither."

1

2

cried the Hempie, "so that she can be decently marriet as your ain auldest dochter ocht to be!"

"Ow aye, Hempie! we'll see about that——"

"Weel, faither, then I'll see about the clickie stick!"

"De'il's in the lassie. I'll gie Nance her thousand pounds, and be hanged to her; but for a' that ye are an ill-set Jezebel, traffickin' and bargainin' wi' your ain faither before ye wad help him oot o' a moss-hole!"

"Weel, faither," persisted the practical Hempie, "here's a wee sheet o' white paper wi' a bit stamp in the corner. I see the end o' a callivine pen stickin' oot o' your waistcoat-pooch. Juist gie me a bit screeve o' a note to that effect. It's as weel to hae thae things marked doon in case o' accidents, for I hae kenned folk's memories bein' terrible short whiles."

Still grumbling, but ever sinking steadily deeper in the Muckle Flowe, Peter Chrystie at last indited the required promissory note to the dictation of his affectionate and practical daughter, and our especial benefactress.

Thereafter, the Hempie became suddenly able to reach her father the crooked shepherd's stick which had fallen from his hand, and to drag him out upon the comparatively dry land on the level of the moss.

Peter never stopped a moment to rage, but made directly for home, shaking his head and muttering, "Glaur to the oxters, half-drooned, half-starved—Oh the besom! My certes, Hempie, but you are no slow! Ye did you faither to richts that time! Faith, there's no yin i' the pairish wad hae thocht on sic a thing but yoursel'! But God peety the man that gets ye, that's a'!"

And, strange to tell, from that day Peter took greatly both to Nance and myself; and when, as he is wont to say, "the auld man slips away," there will be Nether Neuk for us, the prodigal laird having at last betaken himself to his appointed place.

Grace married the laird o' Butterhole and lived comfortably ever after. The Hempie is still single, and maintains her paradox that she has never yet seen the man whom she would not exchange for a double handful of hazel-nuts.

Mary Grey is dead in a ripe old age, and I have a swifter pony now, even a coachman with silver buttons—at which last Nance jeers, but sees that Jenkins keeps them duly brilliant all the same.

On my daily journeyings I often come across the old man of Nether Neuk, his peculiarities touched a little now with the pathos of age and a daily growing childishness, into something more

likeable than of old. I see him still ambulating querulously about the backs of bieldy dykes and hirpling over the road-side fields. I hear out of the summer woods and spring copses the weary pipe of his ancient refrain. For he remembers nothing whatever now of all the tragedy of that March night, and still holds to it that his shepherd Rab is shirking his trysted labour as of old behind some heathery knoll. He keeps his stick short in the grip to be ready when he catches the Taed malingering, and cautiously circumnavigates every bush with eternal hope in his eye. There is silence for a moment as he finds nothing, and then I hear the old refrain begin again:

"Saw ye ocht o' Rab An'erson, Lazy Taed?"

But since I bade him adieu at the corner of the wood, and Nance delivered Rab and his De'il as her father and brother on board the emigrant ship in Loch Ryan (to which dazed and stupid Rab could never have been able to engineer his way, nor yet to arrange his passage when there), no one in Scotland has seen aught of Rab An'erson.

But up in the White North, where the straight roofs of Chipewyan break the boundless expanse of snow and the spiky irregularity of the scanty woods, the chief factor of the great post knows one Robert Anderson, who, however, cannot ap-

appropriately be called "Lazy Taed," since by general consent he and his son are the best hunters and traders to be found in the territory. For one thing it is too cold up there to lie long about dyke-backs, even if such encouragers of sloth were to be found in the Northland, anywhere between the barrens and the wide St. Lawrence.

Letters come from Whinnyliggate to the Fort—one at least by every mail. And others, fewer but sufficient, ill-spelt and much travelled, arrive in due course at the silent little house set above the clustered chimneys of the village—the house where the faithful Hoolet tends her "man," misty-eyed, helpless as a babe, and cherishes him at once with the love of a mother and with the devotion of a great-hearted, much-forgiving woman, rich in silence and mighty in sacrifice of self.

Her boy Nat is at school, and throws stones over the dyke at the master's chickens in the intervals of his education. The master, Dominie Walker, retorts at shorter range and with better effect.

There is generally a letter from far away lying on the table before the Hoolet, and as she spells it out she keeps the senseless invalid's hand in hers. She sits by him well-content all through the day, after her work is done—through the

weeks also, and the years. The minister tries sometimes to get her to go to church, offering to send a substitute to tend her silent patient while she is gone.

"My kirk is here!" the Hoolet says, laying a hand on her "man's" shoulder. "See!"

She loosens her fingers from his grasp, moves away, and motions the minister to take her place. He sits down and takes Nathan Murdoch's slack, soft hand kindly.

The man bereft of understanding turns his head slowly to and fro. He draws his fingers away and moves them vaguely this way and that, as if he groped for something he could not find. Tears gather in the gentle, over-clouded, witless eyes. A sob like a child's breaks from the rough, manly throat.

"Yes, then—I am here! I am here!" murmurs, with infinite gentleness, the woman, crooning over the man who would have wronged her, but who had been taken in his own device.

The minister put his hand on the man's head.

"Perhaps," he said to comfort her, "he is being tried in the furnace here below, and will come out, hereafter, as gold that is seven times refined. Though here he be dead while he lives, yet may his true life be hid with Christ in God!"

For which doctrine, though doubtless it com-

forted the woman, his Presbytery, had they known it, would have entered into judgment with him.

But when the minister had gone out, the Hoolet laid the letter from Chipewyan again on the table, only to snatch it up quickly as Peter Chrystie came hirpling and coughing up the lane. Then with a swift pat to the flaccid hand, the girl rose and went to the door. She locked it and returned. Peter's yammering chorus came faintly through the open window as, baffled of entrance, he proceeded hillwards again, going forth undiscouraged and undismayed upon the eternal quest for his lost shepherd.

And still the light wandering winds carry over the moors the plaintive refrain:—

*"Saw ye ocht o' Rab An'erson—Rab An'erson,
Lazy Taed?"*

THE END.

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